



-シーキューブ-

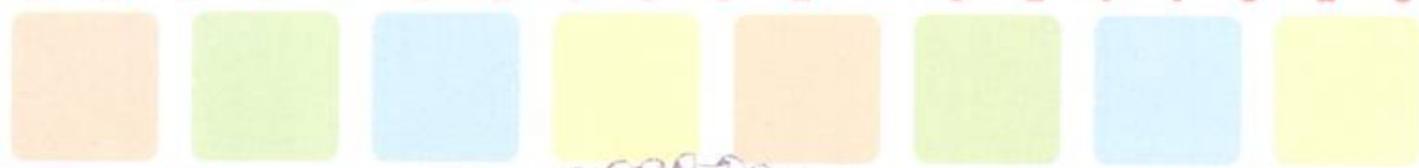
CubexCursedxCurious

153
XIV

水瀬葉月
Illustration くそりがため

電撃文庫

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



Cube×Cursed×Curious

水瀬葉月

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C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



「村正さまは言うまでもなく
拙者以上の殺戮刀。
故に、我らが前には血風しか吹かず、
我らが背には朱の棄道しか
残りますまい」

長曾祢虎徹

和装口りの男の娘。その本性は敬愛するこのはと同じく呪われた日本刀。ニルシャーキの得物となっている。

ニルシャーキ

大秋高校の英語教師…
…は仮初の姿で、正体
は竜島／竜頭師団の第
二位。最強を目指すた
めこのはを手中にした。

「すべきは
竜に最も近しい存在を倒し、
竜へと至るために
その血肉を喰らうことのみ」

Scene02:最強を目指す者たち

や ち はる あき 夜知春亮

長い間、ともに過ごしてきたこのはを救出するため覚悟完了している模様。その様子には危うさすらあるが……。

「……私の告白は、まだ終わってはないなんだな。あいつの答えが返ってくるまでは、まだ継続中なんだ……」

「俺は何でもやる。何でもだ」

「春亮が、人を殺すことになつてもか」

ファ

夜知家の先輩&けんか相手でもあるこのはへの想いと、我が身を顧みずこのはを助けようとする春亮への危惧で揺れる。

うえ の きり か 上野錐霞

春亮に告白した直後にこのはの事件が起これ、いろいろと悩み中。はたして彼女が出す答えとは。

Scene03: 奪還作戦

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



◆ 10 プロローグ

◆ 20 第一章「彼女という悪夢。その現状」
"The blade - It's solitary."

◆ 80 第二章「弱者という愚物。その罪過」
"The blade - It's ferocious."

◆ 122 第三章「騎士という暗黒。その意義」
"The blade - It's two-faced."

◆ 172 第四章「鍊磨という前進。その恐怖」
"The blade - It's heavy."

◆ 220 第五章「明日という未来。その眺望」
"The blade - It's too sharp."

◆ 250 第六章「願いという呪い。その末路」
"The blade - It's (un)breakable."

◆ 342 エピローグ



C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

Designed by Toru Suzuki

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-シーキューブ-

CubexCursedxCurious

CXW

水瀬葉月

Illustration さそりがため



Prologue

The backs of the students' heads were spaced out regularly in a row, with even some of them napping, nodding frequently. Next to the blackboard, the clock slowly carved out the passage of time. Someone's textbook fell on their desk with a thud. Some students were playing with their cellphone. Some girls were passing notes to neighboring desks. Some boys were reading manga under their desks.

Countless English letters were written in cursive on the blackboard. For some reason, instead of a certain new petite female teacher, starting from a few classes ago, these English words were written by the elderly head of year, currently teaching from the lectern. However, the English coming from his mouth was no different from a hypnotic incantation. The chalk wrote at a sluggish pace. The sound of attentive students turning the pages of their notebooks echoed within the classroom like the flapping of wings. No matter how much anyone wished, the hands of the clock did not advance at all—

To most people, this was probably a daily sight that could not be more commonplace.

But to Yachi Haruaki, that was not so.

This was simply the situation.

Resting his chin on his hand, elbow against the desk, he had his face turned to the side, staring out of the open window.

Spacing out, he cast his gaze towards the sunny blue sky.

Or rather, this might not be what one would call a stare.

Perhaps this was the act of "looking at nothing at all."

Silently, he sighed. Perhaps even he was not aware of it. Ever since this lesson started, it was anyone's guess how many times he had sighed already. His sighs were like lost children, drifting out the window, disappearing without trace.

Indifferent in gaze. Imperceptible will. He was completely like a plant.

Until the end of class, all along—

Staring ahead aimlessly nonstop, breathing out aimless sighs—

During PE class, the students were playing dodge ball. The girls were exchanging glances, even swallowing apologies back down their throats.

After the ball bounced off the silver-haired girl's head, she simply stood dazed in one spot, staring blankly without even glancing at the ball rolling away after bouncing off her.

"Umm~ Fear-chan, are you okay...?"

"Hmm...? What are you talking about?"

"Uh, basically... the ball..."

"Oh, sure, the ball. Yeah, the ball. I know. This one, right?"

Speaking in a distracted tone of voice, Fear sluggishly picked up the ball then passed it to the outfield girl who was talking to her.

"Take it, don't lose it again."

"Eh? No, umm..."

Fear turned around again, spacing out, standing inside the field. With a troubled look on her face, the outfield girl asked the friend next to her:

"What should we do? Is she saying that head hits don't count?"

"Maybe. Why don't you throw it again and see?"

"Sure... Fear-chan, are you ready~? I'm throwing it now~"

"Oh..."

The dazed reply sounded no different from a moan. Although Fear had her back facing them, everyone knew that she possessed outstanding athletic reflexes. In a show of superhuman reaction, Fear might actually catch the ball to astonish them.

After the female student politely said "I'm throwing it," the ball flew in a parabolic trajectory.

"..."

Smack! Roll roll roll...

Apart from striking her shoulder this time, the rest happened exactly as before.

"Oh dear~ Fear-chan, are you feeling unwell~? Anyway, you're out so please take a break off the field~"

"Oh... Three people are out already...? Time to swap positions..."

Fear muttered, still spacing out. Pushing her by the back, Kana escorted Fear off the field.

Watching this scene, the girls in the outfield all shrugged and murmured quietly in exasperation:

"This is totally hopeless."

Dressed in gym clothes, sitting on the ground, hugging her knees, Kirika was watching the same scene from a slight distance.

Next she shifted her gaze. The boys were doing long distance running on the track. She could see one of the boys simply staring at the ground in front of his feet, showing no change in expression, mechanically moving his legs back and forth as though suffering some kind of punishment.

Quietly, Kirika held a hand against her chest.

There was no doubt about this. This could not possibly have nothing to do with her.

Then basically, this was what happened.

She was partly to blame for the current situation.

Her action had served as some sort of impetus.

So painful. So sad. Her heart felt like shattering into fragments.

But even so...

She could not pretend things never happened.

Neither could she do things over again.

Whether this simple yet surreal situation or everyone involved in it...

Or the confession upon which she had gambled everything of hers, for which she still had yet to receive an answer—

Burying her face against her knees that were pressed together, Kirika closed her eyes lightly.

Then when she opened her eyes again, would everything progress smoothly all of a sudden? Was someone able to take a time machine to go back and change this world for her?

She was totally lost as to what she should be doing next, to the point of making this sort of meaningless wish.

Hence, maintaining this posture, she murmured softly between her knees:

"Absolutely... ridiculous..."

Meanwhile, Ningyouhara Kuroe was sitting on the veranda at home, gazing upwards at the sky or looking out into the large trees standing tall in a corner of the garden. Every now and then, she also turned her gaze to the exposed soil in the garden, the unkempt weeds or the accessory dwelling's window.

In other words, in rare moment, she was doing nothing at all. This was her current task.

Just at this time, the doorbell's ringing was heard throughout the house.

Kuroe looked up, startled. Desperately, she propelled herself across the corridor with her short legs as quickly as possible, then threw open the front door with full force.

"Kono...!"

"Oh, hello~ I've got a delivery for you, could you sign or put a stamp here?"

Standing before her was a delivery man dressed in the familiar uniform.

Kuroe remained still for quite a while, looking upwards at the guy with slightly resentful eyes.

"Umm~ Is something wrong...?"

Finally, making a forlorn smile, Kuroe shook her head and answered the troubled delivery man with words that could not be more true.

"Nothing. It's just that... what's delivered isn't the goods that we desire the most."

The lunch break was about to end.

Along the corridor in school, two pairs met each other by chance. Each pair consisted of a female student paired with a girl who was dressed in a most unnatural outfit, objectively speaking. But inside this school, everyone had already reached a consensus that this unnaturalness was a daily sight, nothing worth getting worked up about.

"Oh my."

"Oh! Shiraho-san..."

"Hello everyone~"

"Ara ara, please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, greetings to you two~"

Shiraho and the maid outfit-wearing Sovereignty were standing side by side next to a window in the corridor, looking outside the school building. Passing by coincidentally, Chihaya was accompanied by Isuzu who was dressed as shrine maiden. They looked out as well, following Shiraho and Sovereignty's gazes.

Clutching textbooks and other belongings to their chest, a group of students were moving through the connecting passageway between buildings outside the window. Since the next period consisted of electives, they were having class in the specialized classrooms. However, since Shiraho's elective was different from them, that was why she was standing here.

Watching the group through the window, they could see a few familiar faces.

At the same time, those people's faces were rather distracted.

"Shiraho-san, have you heard?"

"Yes, roughly."

"Me too. It's so worrying... How did things come to this?"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, I feel the same way too~"

At this moment, Shiraho scoffed and crossed her arms.

"I, on the other hand, am not worried at all. No matter what happens to them, it has nothing to do with me."

"Jeez, Shiraho~ Seeing Haruaki-kun and the others like that, it does make us feel a bit depressed. I really hope they can lift their spirits soon."

"Even though it's perfectly clear what will lift their spirits~"

Just at this moment, an even taller figure joined the quartet staring out the window. This person was not a student, but unlike Sovereignty and Isuzu, she was not dressed out-of-place either. Well, she just had a shovel on her shoulder, that was all.

"The problem lies herein. Even though what is required is known, carrying it out is impossible."

"Wah! It's Kaidou-sensei."

Suddenly noticing the Scoop Teacher standing next to them, Sovereignty jumped in surprise. Kaidou turned her gaze and said:

"I fear that the situation is very difficult to handle. Precisely because of that, I believe that one must not put up brave appearances. If you do that, you will not be able to help your friends even when you really want to.
Sakuramairi Shiraho, girl, Seat No.6 of Year 2 Class 1."

"I-I... Nothing of that sort..."

At this time, the group of students in the connecting passageway had entered the school building. Almost at exactly the same time, the bell rang to signal the end of the lunch break. Shiraho exhaled as though feeling saved.

"I must go to class. Sovereignty, do your best at work too."

"I will~! Shiraho, don't nap in class either!"

"Yes. Hurry along back to class, or else you will be late. The same goes for you, Hayakawa Chihaya, girl, Seat No.15 of Year 1 Class 4."

"Y-Yes..."

Why does she even know my seat number? —Chihaya muttered quietly. Bidding Shiraho and Sovereignty goodbye, she then prepared to step away from the window side. However, Chihaya looked back one final time to see those students disappearing into the school building's entrance.

Most striking of all was, of course, that head of long silver hair. Afterimages of the silver hair seemed to linger in the connecting passageway.

Furthermore, chasing after those afterimages, glittering like gemstones, running about in a hurry was a certain mirage of someone tall. Chihaya watched that scene of the deserted connecting passageway. With a feeling like someone was choking her chest, she watched that scene.

"Maybe she still hasn't come to terms with it... What a great big idiot..."

Chihaya bit her lip lightly and looked forward again. Just as she took a step, intending to return to her classroom, her face collided into some kind of soft object. Immediately, she then felt a hand on top of her head.

"Isuzu, what are you doing?"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, I am currently burying Chihaya-sama's tiny face in my bosom and stroking your head~ As for the reason, Chihaya-sama, it's because you seem to want me to do so—"

"You... idiot. I'm gonna... hurt you..."

However, she did not put her words into action.

Chihaya did not do anything. As though trying to erase something, as though trying to suppress certain memories, she shook her head lightly in Isuzu's bosom.

Hence, after discreetly confirming that there was no one else in the corridor after the bell had rung, Isuzu smiled gently and said:

"Yes. Well then, before you hurt me, let's stay like this for now."

Even a day like this was coming to an end.

It was the last period of the day. Still staring blankly out the window, prompted by no particular reason, Haruaki finally turned his gaze into the interior of the classroom.

His gaze stopped on a certain desk.

An empty desk. A desk where no one was sitting at. A desk that had lost its owner.

An equally ordinary sight, existing amidst the scenery of the ordinary lesson—But precisely because of that, the terrifying sense of reality was implanted deeply into Haruaki's brain. Mercilessly, cheerlessly, it told him, this was reality.

Yes—He felt it concretely.

For who knows how many times, how many dozens of times, how many hundreds of times, this sense of reality that he did not want at all.

No matter how much he denied it, this sense of reality surging back every time, or in other words, it was simply reality.

—Konoha had gone missing.

Chapter 1 - The Nightmare Known as Her; Its Situation / "The blade - It's solitary."

Part 1

After the school excursion ended, on that day when they returned home—

Ever since the day when Konoha had disappeared without warning, several days had already passed.

Haruaki's group had skipped school, searching tirelessly day and night the entire vicinity, but still came up with nothing. If there were any other way, they would have tried them all, but plagued by a lack of information, they soon ran out of options. Perhaps Konoha might suddenly show up at school—Carrying this last glimmer of baseless hope, Haruaki's group finally went to school, but of course, that school desk remained empty. Anyway, they could only explain to their classmates: "We all caught a flu earlier, but only Konoha hasn't recovered yet and she's resting at home."

After a tasteless dinner, it was evening in the usual living room—

Today, they had also invited Kirika over, deciding to have another discussion regardless.

Starting a while ago, Kirika had seemed quite hesitant about a certain matter, her gaze wandering unsteadily all over the ceiling. Without saying a word, Fear was chewing on rice crackers. Blankly, Kuroe was drinking tea from her cup.

Haruaki was staring intently at the object on the table.

The one and only clue.

After a carpet search for Konoha's whereabouts, they had discovered this in the forest behind the house—Konoha's glasses.

Her glasses had fallen there. What did it signify?

"Even at this kind of time... Rice crackers still remain tasty..."

Biting a rice cracker especially loudly, Fear went "Okay!" and using this chewing motion as a prompt, she made a forceful nod. Taking control of her dainty face which had been spacing out, she looked like she was forcing herself to regain vitality.

"Okay! Staying silent's not gonna help. Let's confirm the situation once more."

"Yes, organizing our information is very important."

Seeing the static living room starting to show movement, Kuroe seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

"After going out for groceries, Cow Tits went missing. She didn't come back and neither did she go to school. She didn't call to contact us at all either. So—Who's the last to see her?"

"...It's us."

"Us... Also, regarding that... Fear-kun, Kuroe-kun."

As though trying to correct Haruaki, Kirika spoke up. Resting on her thigh, her hand was tightly clutching the hem of her uniform's skirt.

"All this time, I haven't been able to find a chance to say this, but I really must tell you all about this matter... It's about the situation during Konoha-kun's disappearance..."

Haruaki finally understood why Kirika had been acting unusual since a while ago. Surely, this must have weighed heavily on her mind, troubling her all this time. Then steeling her determination to tell Fear and Kuroe personally today, she had come over.

Clearly Haruaki himself had simply avoided thinking about that certain matter between her and him. Because it might be too heavy a burden for his mind, he simply kept it hidden in the depths of his heart. This was shameful self-preservation and also the worst kind of ignoring.

At the same time, after seeing her in this state, only then did Haruaki realize how little energy he had left to divert towards paying attention to the outside world. Normally, he would have noticed Kirika's troubles much earlier. Even if he stopped thinking about the matter, it did not mean she was doing the same. Only now did he discover how preoccupied he was to notice other people.

Haruaki exhaled, but this time, it was not an aimless sigh but like Fear's act of biting a rice cracker, a signal to renew his spirits and move forward.

Then to unravel Kirika's misunderstanding, so as to stop her from feeling too troubled by something that was not supposed to burden her conscience, Haruaki spoke:

"It's not like that, Class Rep. This has nothing to do with what happened at the time."

"...Huh?"

"I know for sure. After Konoha parted with us, something must have happened. Something must have happened that even Konoha herself did not expect. I believe this had nothing to do with the situation earlier. Otherwise—This pair of glasses wouldn't have fallen in the forest back there."

Haruaki deliberately tried to assert firmly. Perhaps his grounds were weak but he was certain it must have happened this way. This was absolutely nothing so simple as Konoha running away from home. Instead, she must have encountered something. Something that she could not avoid even if she tried to avoid.

"R-Really? But..."

Kirika still hesitated, but Fear nodded.

"Yeah. In other words, something happened in the forest where she dropped the glasses and Cow Tits was caught up in it?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Hmm... These developments are resembling that Police 24 Hours show on television more and more... So, something must have happened in reality. If only there was some kind of clue."

"I saw on television once, a man killed and robbed his neighbor, but was discovered by the police because his lifestyle became rich all of a sudden. If someone did something to Cow Tits for a certain purpose, the result is probably visible by now. Has anything weird happened around us?"

Haruaki pondered this and that. Weird things. Changes. Were there any?
Yes.

"I don't know if it's related or not—but Sagisaki-sensei suddenly stopped coming to school."

"Yeah. I originally thought she was just missing class and absent once or twice, but it looks like that Sugimura teacher will take over English class from now on. Did Sagisaki quit her job?"

"It does seem suspicious, but we can't be certain."

"Also, this is what I confirmed from Taizou."

Haruaki recalled the scene in the classroom and continued. Since that person attracted a lot of attention, her absence was easily noticed even if he did pay particular attention.

"Apparently, Un Izoey has taken leave from school starting the day before yesterday."

"Maybe the Lab Chief's Nation is up to something. Whether due to this reason or some other reason, they are currently investigating? But none of this can be confirmed."

"There's also a rumor saying it's just an unexpected flu. Consider this as just another possibility."

What exactly was the truth? Was Un Izoey involved in this incident in any way? Who knows. What about Sagisaki-sensei? Who knows. Had other changes appeared? Who knows. What was currently happening? How far should they go in skepticism? What should they do next...

Seconds, minutes of time flowed by without answers. Not long after, Haruaki discovered that the teapot was empty.

"I'll go brew another pot."

Saying that to Fear, Kirika and Kuroe, Haruaki went to the kitchen, taking the opportunity for a change of mood. Filling the pot with water and placing it on the gas stove, he waited quietly. Just as he was wondering blankly whether or not to prepare some snacks to go with the tea—

"Umm... May I assist you?"

"Oh Class Rep. Sure, of course."

Kirika had also come to the kitchen. Haruaki felt his heart rate speed up, but he believed he had responded naturally. Slightly timidly, Kirika leaned her upper torso into the kitchen from the doorway, seeming inexplicably

awkward. But as soon as she heard Haruaki's answer, she smiled with relief.

Standing side by side, the two of them prepared tea and snacks. This was something they had done many times before already. Haruaki handed the spare apron to her just as usual. Nevertheless, why was he feeling nervous? Why did mere contact between fingertips cause his heart to pound and race uncontrollably?

Haruaki knew very clearly that certain things had to be said. Something he had ignored and set aside until now. Something very important, truly crucial, a certain matter whose answer he must speak only after careful consideration.

Haruaki gulped. If they were to discuss that matter, now was the only chance when Fear and Kuroe were both absent.

"Umm..."

"It's okay."

Quietly, Kirika spoke in a tone of voice that even felt gentle. She must have realized the subject from his demeanor. At least, Haruaki was certain that she was also thinking about this matter all along, which was why she could react so quickly.

The unexpectedly swift answer, together with its message, caused Haruaki to feel unsure how to proceed.

"Eh? Umm, by okay you mean...?"

Standing next to him, Kirika still continued to face the kitchen counter.

"Like I said, it's okay. You still have many other matters you should be thinking about—However, I hope you won't forget. I also hope you won't pretend it never happened. I don't intend to do that either. Once, Konoha-kun returns and all the issues are resolved... I will listen properly to your answer. That's all I can say."

By the time she finished, Kirika's voice was already so quiet it was barely audible, almost as though she were murmuring to herself. However, those were definitely the words she spoke from her lips, her own words. This was evidenced by the skillfully concealed trembling, trepidation and nervousness included in her voice.

"...Sorry."

"What exactly is your apology directed towards? Absolutely ridiculous."

"No, uh, basically... That..."

Haruaki did not have a clear idea either. Surely the apology had many kinds of meanings. He was unable to put everything into words. Besides, he did not even know if he should apologize. He was... truly incompetent.

"How should I say it? Anyway... Can we keep things the same... for now?"

"Yes, we can, but you mustn't forget what I just said."

"I-I won't forget. Yeah, in any case—The same as before, the same as before. Okay!"

Haruaki was muttering "the same as before, the same as before" like some kind of incantation when Kirika suddenly asked a question. However, she still continued to face forward.

"...Is it very difficult?"

"Uh, yeah. Maybe because it's so sudden, I can't help but think, are you really serious, for example? There's a part that I haven't managed to digest completely, so it still feels a bit unreal. So it's very difficult to suddenly go back to the way things were, that's the kind of feeling—Haha, what am I saying..."

The instant just as Haruaki was forcing an awkward laugh—

Kirika quietly turned herself to face him squarely instead of facing the kitchen counter all this time. Looking up, she looked straight at him.

Her ponytail was swaying right before his eyes. An apron on top of her school uniform. Slightly blushing cheeks.

Exuding an aura of seriousness, she gazed sincerely at Haruaki.

"If... you still need evidence... to prove that I am very serious..."

However, her eyes carried slight shyness and determination.

Probably intentionally, she lifted her chin slightly and said:

"Right now, I could allow you to..."



For some reason, Haruaki found his gaze drawn to a certain part of her face. Due to a certain movement of her chin, unbelievably, he had no choice but to stare at that part. As though emphasizing their existence, slowly opening and closing to utter words, Kirika's pink lips—

Haruaki's throat moved on its own, gulping hard. Reading between the lines of what Kirika said, he could not help but imagine that scene, gulping again.

Just at this moment—

"Hey~ Haruaki, is the tea ready!? Don't forget to bring out new rice crackers too—!"

"Woahhhh! R-Right, I have to brew the tea, brew the tea! Uh, umm... Yeah, I already know you're serious, Class Rep, so... Yeah, anyway, for now... let's keep things the same as before..."

The voice coming from the living room brought Haruaki forcefully back to reality. While speaking, he moved his hands again which had stopped without him noticing. Kirika also turned her face back in a most natural manner, simply saying:

"I see."

Then she faced the kitchen counter again to prepare snacks. Returning to her initial state.

However, Haruaki still noticed.

The distance between their shoulders was no longer the same as before.

He was not sure whether they had grown closer or farther—He simply sensed a change, that was all.

At the same time, this distance definitely did not make him feel uncomfortable.

Hence, he decided to allow himself to think: the current state was fine.

—Very likely, undoubtedly, this was very cowardly.

Part 2

Hence, with a fresh pot of tea, Haruaki returned to the living room—

To be honest, starting a long while ago, somewhere in the dark depths of his heart, Haruaki had already suspected something like this to happen, hence he was not especially surprised.

Just as he was pulling the sliding door on the kitchen side to enter the living room, Fear and the others suddenly stood up in alarm. But rather than towards Haruaki, they were looking in the opposite direction, towards the veranda leading to the garden.

Inside the dark garden, two figures were standing at the veranda's edge.

One figure was dark-skinned with gray-colored hair. The other was petite in stature with bandages wrapped around her face. Both of them were dressed in lab coats.

"My surprise: Disbelief at entering your house after getting lost? What a coincidence."

"Yes. It's been... A while..."

After Un Izoey made an incredible excuse with a fully serious face, Amanda Carlot next to her—the young girl who used to be known as Mummy Maker—bowed as a greeting. She seemed quite embarrassed, hiding slightly behind Un Izoey's back.

Fear sat down again slowly, placing the Rubik's cube in her hand onto the table. However, she did not move her hand away, keeping the cube under her palm as though trying to convey or display something to the two people in the garden. Then staring at them intently, she said:

"I've no idea if you two are involved in this incident, but you must know what's going on at least. Hurry and tell us."

"Fear-kun, I keep repeating this, the Lab Chief's Nation is not our ally. Even the incident during the school excursion turned out to be a scheme conducted by the Lab Chief's Nation. It's better not to trust them too much—As much as I'd really like to insist on that, sigh. There's too little information at the moment. It's totally not a situation where I could simply say 'shut up and get lost'..."

Kirika sighed while she spoke. Un Izoey nodded seriously, her gray hair shaking vertically.

"She is correct. We are not your allies. So I suggest suggestion of not saying anything in particular."

"What!? Then why are you two here? I'll curse you!"

"However—I add by giving explanation of current situation. Because we have lost our way and arrived here by chance, we are a little tired right now. Faced with tasty tea and round food, it is possible that the unknown we are currently investigating might slip out."

Another roundabout excuse, but surely they must have many difficulties given their standpoint.

Smiling wryly, Haruaki glanced at Amanda and said:

"Are you in agreement with your troublesome senior here?"

"...Yes, that's right. If relaxed, maybe, slip of tongue..."

"Haha, I get it. Understood!"

Although laughing in appearance, Haruaki felt unease and anticipation beginning to swirl in a vortex in his heart.

Surely, these two girls knew.

They knew what had happened to Konoha.

Where Konoha was right now, doing what.

If such information could be obtained—Naturally, it was nothing more than preparing two cups of tea, truly effortless.

Part 3

Sharp, full of wildness and vigor—if a person's gaze possessed a blade's sharpness, simply by touching this gaze, simply getting seen by her, it felt as though he would be sliced in half.

A person bearing such a gaze.

He thought to himself that he should stand in the shadows of the corridor, peeking as his father brought her through the entryway.

At the time, she had shown an expression of overt displeasure. Her eyes were vicious to begin with. Now she even creased her face in a frown, furrowing her elegant brow, boldly sweeping her gaze back and forth to appraise the entryway.

"Hmph... Verily, 'tis a plain house. Too small to be worthy of welcoming one such as I, Honatsu."

"Please don't make comparisons with the mansions of those feudal lords in the past. In the current era, this house is already considered quite large."

The father replied. His appearance back then—Haruaki could not quite remember.

It was probably because he was staring intently at her, he thought.

Beyond shoulder length, her hair draped down freely without restraint. Her facial features were clearly so beautiful that it gave an impression of noble elegance, yet at the same time, there was this wild aura belonging to a carnivorous predator. Between her lips, he could catch a faint glimpse of sharp canines—Indeed, they were like those of a ferocious wild dog's. Back then, he had thought this to himself. Bearing unkempt fur, yet rather proud, extremely ferocious. If he were to make a move recklessly, he might end up devoured completely in an instant.

Her bare feet were wearing shoes similar to wooden clogs. A kimono was casually wrapped around her, the sash tied sloppily in an audacious manner. As though emphasizing how little she cared for trivial details, a large snow-white patch of her thigh was exposed near the overlapping portion of the hem. Her shoulders were also virtually naked while her upper body's clothing was merely hanging on a certain part of her anatomy.

"Nevertheless, compared to those dwellings akin to dog houses seen on the way here, this is slightly better."

Speaking with disinterest, she pulled at her collar to fan wind towards her chest. Rather, it was Haruaki who felt embarrassed to be observing.

But back then, his honest thoughts were—This person's boobs are so big.

"Ah~ Hey, let me make this clear first. There's a child here. As a matter of education, please pay attention."

"Oh? Thou art referring to 'that thing' which has been peeking in this direction from a while ago?"

Suddenly, his gaze met with those wild-looking eyes. She had apparently noticed his presence a long time ago. He could not help but back away in fright. She scoffed.

"What education art thou talking about, Honatsu? I only came here because I relented to thy excessive nagging. Thou hast no right to command me. Neither is there any reason for me to watch my ways—Speaking of education, ha! Why not allow me to rid this brat of his virginity? As an occasional snack, young boys are rather fun to play with."

"Give me a break. Haruaki is only nine."

His father said in exasperation, walking into the house from the concrete entryway. He placed his hand on Haruaki's head just as he passed by.

"Let me introduce her to you later. You two head over to the living room first. I'll go brew some tea."

"O-Okay."

After his father went to the kitchen, Haruaki looked back by chance to see her standing in the corridor behind him, having taken off her clogs without him noticing. Should he say hello? Despite thinking this, nervousness and shyness prevented him from speaking, causing him to totally miss the timing. In this manner, the two of them looked at each other quietly without speaking.

Amidst the silence, he suddenly remembered his father had said "You two head over to the living room first." It took him a few seconds before the meaning struck him. Turning around hastily, he pulled open the living room's sliding door and entered. He could hear her footsteps following slowly behind.

Before she came in, Haruaki grabbed the guest's cushion kept in a corner of the living room and added it to the side of the table. Just then, she entered at this time and swept her sharp gaze across the living room—

"..."

Rather than sitting on the cushion that Haruaki had just taken out, she crossed her legs and sat down on the head seat's cushion that was present to begin with. Although it was his father's seat, Haruaki decided it did not really matter.

How should he describe it? Because in terms of demeanor, Haruaki thought that compared to his father, her sitting there seemed even more matter-of-fact.

Carrying a tray, his father returned to the living room. Having waited while sitting obediently in his seat, only now did Haruaki exhale in relief. Since he had missed the timing, in the end, he remained silent all along.

Exuding an air of displeasure from her entire body, supporting her chin with her hand, elbow against the table, glaring into space with narrowed eyes, she spoke at this time:

"Hey, thou must have brought top-quality wine, hast thou not?"

Finding his seat claimed naturally by someone else, the father's face twitched once, but letting things go with an adult's generosity, he then sat down on an unoccupied cushion.

"Unfortunately, there's no alcohol at home, only tea, so let's have tea."

"No."

"Try it. I did say that I'll offer you delicious tea, right?"

The father pushed the teacup next to her hand, somewhat forcefully. She used the back of her hand to push it away in annoyance.

"I said no. 'Tis wine that I want to drink now."

"I used high-quality tea leaves, you know? It'll be a waste if you don't drink it."

"As if anyone shall heed thee."

"Don't say that, hurry and drink it."

Shoving back and forth, the two of them pushed the teacup relentlessly.

"Tsk... Enough!"

Finally, she clicked her tongue in agitation and grabbed the teacup from his father's hand in a manner akin to a slapping motion. Back then, Haruaki was amazed that the tea did not spill out in the process.

Seeing her bring the teacup gruffly to her lips, the father seemed to be saying "I won!" as the corners of his lips curled up. Then with a victorious smirk, he turned to look at Haruaki.

"Then it's time to explain to you. It's now time for self-introductions. This girl here—"

The father had only spoken halfway when she took the teacup away from her lips and frowned in a very angry manner.

"Hmph—Such accursed taste!"

Then without any hesitation, she threw the teacup at Haruaki's father in the manner of a shoulder throw.

"Gwahhhhhhhh!"

Splashed with hot tea, the father rolled all over the living room floor in an exaggerated manner. She went "hmpf" again, staring at his father as though watching a boring sideshow.

"Hoh! Hoh! Ohoff—! These tea leaves are very expensive, you know!?"

"Muu. Under such circumstances, dost thou still care about the value of tea leaves? For the very first time, I find thee to be quite an astounding fellow, possibly..."

Honestly speaking, Haruaki found her quite terrifying, saying such words calmly.

However, however—

Despite having done such a thing, causing Haruaki's father to roll on the floor comically, she still showed eyes glimmering with the light of absolute boredom. Her eyes were still glimmering as though she had tired of everything.

For some reason, this bothered Haruaki greatly.

He also felt an impulse, no matter what, he wanted to talk to her.

Just as his father had said, it was currently time for self-introductions. Well then, I'll try to introduce myself.

"Umm..."

"Hmm?"

"I-I'm Yachi Haruaki... Hi—Greetings."

Haruaki mustered his courage to talk to her. Due to nervousness, his words ended up quite weird.

Narrowing one eye to look at him with slight surprise, she then grinned like a carnivorous animal.

"Hoh—I have no intention of being fastidious with a brat's etiquette. Dispense with the polite speech. Thou art Honatsu's son, yes?"

Although hesitant, Haruaki still decided to follow her orders. Hence, he spoke in a normal tone of voice:

"Yeah, that's right."

"Art thou not afraid of me? Honesty is appreciated."

"...Yeah. I'm a bit afraid, but—"

"But?"

How should he say it? Resting her chin against her hand, she was indifferently watching him stammering. After some hesitation, he finally said:

"—But I'm not totally afraid."

"Ha, what is this?"

She was probably expecting a more profound answer from Haruaki. The corners of her lips curled as though greatly surprised. Nevertheless, her mood did not seem to deteriorate as a result of this.

"However, thou art a very courageous brat simply for not turning incontinent in my very presence. Thou mayst serve as a partner to dispel my boredom. Well then, what shall we do to pass time... Amusement, amusement... Yes."

Seemingly coming up with something, her eyes narrowed mischievously.

Haruaki could see her pink tongue licking her lips.

"Brat, a question for thee, first of all—Hath thy foreskin retracted yet?"

"Huh?"

Unable to understand what she was asking, Haruaki answered blankly in a daze. But in the next instant, his father suddenly got up from rolling around on the living room floor.

"H-Hold it! Hold it hold it hold it! This is too soon for you, daddy's not gonna permit it! Ohoh, I've always felt that this is a legendary declaration that I must use if an opportunity arises, but I never expected to use these words in this unexpected point in time!"

"Quiet, thee!"

Picking up his father's remaining cup of tea, she threw it forcefully at him. The tea splashed out. Once again, Haruaki's father rolled madly on the floor.

"It's scalding me—! Man, I didn't even get to drink a sip!"

"Thou art worrying over a bizarre issue again... Be that as it may, is there not a saying, drink till thou soakst in it. Enjoy thyself well."

At this point, her face finally seemed to relax somewhat.

Nevertheless, the vibe she exuded still remained unchanged. Although her eyes were filled with wildness, there was this aura of boredom. Her eyes looked as though she were gazing upon something far beyond the horizon.

In his mind, Haruaki was able to admit...

He could recall the words he was unable to speak earlier.

Indeed, she was quite scary with her terrifying attitude and vigor. Nevertheless, that was not all.

The first time he saw her, for no particular reason, this thought had simply struck him.

What a scary-looking person.

However, at the same time, she also looked like a very lonely person.

Hence, he thought of a question that he felt compelled to ask.

"Umm, I've already said mine, but you haven't said yours yet."

"Hmm?"

"I mean... Your name."

"Ohoh." She seemed to be caught slightly unprepared. Still resting her chin on her hand, she straightened her back slightly. Then after pausing for a moment as though in deep thought—

"Muramasa is mine appellation."

She stared straight at Haruaki squarely. At this moment, the sneer on the corners of her lips began to change. Slowly, bit by bit, as though showing him on purpose, the curvature of her lips gradually increased. He could see her terrifying canines flash brightly. Her eyes looked like those belonging to a wild beast whose prey was right in front of it.

Then as though speaking for him to hear...

As though conveying the meaning of her words to him accurately without any misunderstanding...

She then spoke in a tone of voice, heavier and deeper than necessary:

"Verily, I have killed over a hundred brats of thy age."

Her evil expression was very terrifying.

Nevertheless, it was the same as he expected. He had already understood what existed in the depths of her heart.

Hence, Haruaki remembered answering something like this:

"Oh okay~"

Part 4

—I think a dream occurred to me. A very nostalgic dream.

Haruaki slowly sat up from his futon. Morning had yet to arrive. The bedroom was still shrouded in darkness. However, it was not pitch black due to the faint moonlight leaking in from outside the window.

By his pillow was something that quietly reflected the moon's cold blue light. A pair of round-rimmed glasses.

(Konoha...)

Haruaki stared at those glasses, mesmerized, meanwhile recalling Un Izoey and Amanda's explanations.

Simply stated—Konoha was abducted by the Draconian named Nirushaaki.

He had heard of this name earlier during the commotion at the welcoming festival for new students. She was ranked number two in the Draconians. The owner of the cursed Japanese sword, Nagasone Kotetsu, which they had encountered during the school excursion.

These two incidents were apparently related to the current situation. During the welcoming festival, that Draconian had stolen a tool belonging to the Knights' Dominion, which was then used on Konoha. In order to use that tool, for the sake of reducing the curse's backlash accompanying its usage, the enemy needed the Indulgence Disk that Haruaki's group was competing against Kotetsu to obtain. Upon hearing about this, Fear's annoyance with the Lab Chief's Nation was lit up once more: "In the end, it's all you bastards' fault for taking the Indulgence Disk away!"

What was the effect of the tool used on Konoha?

What kind of power was so great that an Indulgence Disk was needed at all costs?

Also, why was Konoha unable to escape despite her powerful strength—

These answers were all related. This led to the one and only but unbelievable answer.

(Konoha lost... her memory...?)

It's okay, this is nothing. Haruaki persuaded himself. Just as he had been telling himself until he went to sleep, ever since he heard the explanation from Un Izoey and Amanda. Although it greatly resembled plot from manga, he himself had lost his memory once. This time, it had happened to Konoha, that's all. So there's no problem. This is nothing—

But imperceptibly, he was clenching his fist on top of his blanket. Shifting his gaze away from the two lenses that were silently receiving the moon's rays, he looked up. The desire to sleep was long gone by now.

After being informed by Un Izoey, they had learnt of Nirushaaki's current hiding spot.

Then there was only one thing to do.

Looking up, out of the window, Haruaki wondered if Konoha might be staring at the same pale moon.

As though vowing towards that curving, extraordinarily pristine, clear moon, he resolved himself.

They must rescue Konoha tomorrow.

Then, absolutely—They must bring her back to this home.

At the same time, Fear was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling in her room while thinking.

(To think she lost her memory? That Cow Tits... Too careless of her.)

But then, she thought, this was nothing special. Last time when «Narrow Narrow Abyss» had done certain things to Haruaki and caused him to lose his memory, the memories had recovered instantly after Fear destroyed Abyss without putting much thought into it. The situation now should be the same. Indeed, definitely so. But—

But what?

Fear noticed annoyingly complicated feelings in her heart, causing her to frown and turn over in bed. Was she worrying? Impossible. Why must she worry about that Cow Tits? Even if Cow Tits were gone, she would be completely fine with it. Although for the past three days, Haruaki and Kirika did seem to be acting quite strange—Fear was able to assert with certainty. Whether at home or at school, she had exhibited flawless perfection, showing no signs of mental wavering at all. A perfect woman as always.

Indeed, she could not care less even if that Cow Tits, what an eyesore, did not return. The same sentiments applied to the matter of rescuing Cow Tits. Even though Haruaki and the others looked like they wanted to save her immediately without waiting for morning to arrive, Fear thought that they were absolutely nuts. Not only was it necessary to consider the issues of physical energy and mental preparation, but there was also the fact that night would only tilt odds in the enemy's favor once they stepped into enemy territory. Furthermore, Un Izoey and Amanda had told them that the enemy seemed to show no signs of changing their base immediately, hence Haruaki's group finally decided to wait until morning before taking action.

Fear was not that motivated about tomorrow's task either. How should she put it? All she could say was that she was going there mainly to see that

Cow Tits who was stupid enough to be abducted by the enemy. Also, she was fine with rescuing Cow Tits because it was necessary to gather this as shaming material, to be used in the future to tease or mock her. Getting saved by her and owing a favor, that Cow Tits would definitely find it humiliating as well. This was all there was to it.

(By the way...)

Fear suddenly pulled her thoughts back to the main topic, feeling concerned about the names that she had recalled, namely, that of Un Izoey and Amanda. They had claimed they were passing information along. Naturally, Fear was not going to be deceived by them again. Hence, she listened to them with skepticism. But judging from their attitudes, they did not seem like they were lying.

Simply organizing the information they had heard was already turning Fear's brain into a mess. But after calming down to think like this, Fear really found the whole affair full of mysteries. The Lab Chief's Nation had always manipulated things from behind the scenes so why did they come over to tell them information this time? Also, what did they mean by leaking information while claiming to be lost? Did their superiors, such as Yamimagari Pakuaki, know of this? If they knew, what exactly were they thinking? Un Izoey and Amanda had left before offering to extend a helping hand. What exactly was their purpose?

The more she thought about it, the more confused she got.

Were Un Izoey and Amanda actually their friends or enemies—?

(Uumu...)

Fear tossed and turned in bed for a long time, finally giving up. Because she realized.

Thinking back, the answer to this question had been ambiguous and unknown all along. Hence, by this point, no matter how much she pondered it, she could not possibly come up with an answer, so there was no choice but to go with the flow—

Part 5

The Lab Chief's Room No.6—in other words, his habitat as a living creature—was still filled with knowns and unknowns. Haphazard piles of books, reference materials with densely written annotations, documents

that had traces of burning for some reason. With these objects occupying the bookshelves, the floor and the desk's surface, all of the furniture had lost their original purpose of existence.

Amidst this scene, sitting on a chair, he kept his head down, reading a book, speaking in an amused manner. Perhaps it could be considered a miracle that the chair was still about to sustain a chair's function.

"So, have you two explained to them definitely?"

"My answer: yes. Appraising with self-appraisal, I have successfully transmitted the information, no more no less."

Across a twisted desk whose surface bulged upwards, Un Izoey answered.

"Excellent. But then, it can't be 'no more no less,' right? I've already said that you may tell them everything that's already known. At most, you could leave out information, but giving too much is impossible."

"My statement: regarding Lab Chief's trivial nitpicking, I am confused if I should say thanks or feel agitated."

"Woah! It feels like you're calling me a neurotic man in a roundabout way. How impressive."

While the two of them were conversing, Un Izoey saw something jump out suddenly from the corner of her eye. It was Amanda's hand while she was standing on the side. She had raised her hand, requesting to speak.

"Very well, Amanda-kun, please speak. I always greatly welcome questions in search of answers to the unknown."

"...Why? Forbid us. Direct. Assistance?"

Pakuaki raised an eyebrow as though saying "Oh?" Un Izoey first glanced at the white-haired girl's blank face as she stood beside her, then faced Pakuaki in front of her again. Un Izoey found this to be an excellent unknown to probe. She had originally intended to raise the same question at an opportune timing. Facing the leader of the organization whose goal was to understand everything about the world, there were many concerns and reservations as a subordinate. In this regard, Amanda's ability to ask directly without concern for the mood was probably because her time as a researcher was still short—As a side note, strictly speaking, Amanda was not staying here because she approved of the organization's ideology from

the bottom of her heart. Hence, the sense of distance Amanda felt when confronting the Lab Chief was different from Un Izoey's.

"—Indeed that is unknown. I believe telling them all the information available to us is equivalent to assistance. But why forbid us from providing physical assistance, seems inconsistent? I question with this kind of question."

Finally, he looked up from his book and shrugged lightly.

"No no no, given that I delivered a present to these Draconians, naturally, I'd like to observe how they're going to make use of it without our interference. It would be tantamount to barging into the fitting room when someone's changing. That would be far too tasteless."

"Contradiction. Giving them, information, is that not, interference?"

"That's merely preparation in the preliminary stages of the experiment. Although this analogy might sound unpleasant, when researching how monkeys try to obtain the banana inside a box, you have to let the monkeys know the banana is in the box to begin with, right? This is essentially the same."

"Monkey... Kikinasu huh?"

"What we can do—what I permit you to do—is simply providing them with preliminary information that is conducive to observing them. I cannot allow you to assist them as actual combatants. How will the monkeys obtain the banana? Or will they give up without attempting, letting the banana rot? If you go help them, it would be equivalent to throwing saws into the mix and teaching the monkeys how to use them while I'm observing the scene with interest. Putting aside whether the saws would actually work, but that really cannot be considered a fair experiment."

In other words, to the Yachi faction, Un Izoey and Amanda were equivalent to saws.

But was that really the case? —Un Izoey wondered.

Regarding why she had doubts about not helping them directly, she believed it was not because they were classmates or reasons such as feeling duty-bound to return the many favors she owed to them. As a member of the Lab Chief's Nation, she understood the importance of

observing them and was able to agree with virtually every word that Pakuaki had said.

However—She believed that the current situation was too dangerous.

Depending on circumstances, everything could come crashing to an end with this. Perhaps the inquisitive demon here might be able to accept it as an unknown result... But herself...

At this moment, she suddenly discovered that Pakuaki was watching her with great interest after shutting his book.

"We are probably not saws as rescue tools, but for survival knives as minimum necessity? —That appears to be what your face is saying."

How did he know? Un Izoey casually rubbed her cheeks, tilting her head slightly.

"...My answer: due to unable to see my face, I conclude it is unknown impossible to confirm."

"Haha, that's just my own subjective speculation, don't worry about it. I'd like to ask a question. Don't you trust them? In the past, they have defeated you, the strongest warrior of your tribe. To this date, they have prevailed over numerous formidable adversaries. Do you think that they will be defeated so easily?"

Hearing these words which seem to be challenging the tribe's pride, Un Izoey could only respond in this manner. Refusing to acknowledge their strength would be equivalent to denigrating herself as well as the power possessed by warriors of the tribe.

"I believe in them, but this opponent is a separate matter. What if—"

"Yes, it's not like I can't understand how you feel. So let me compensate you a little."

Pakuaki spoke without warning, meanwhile making a smile like a criminal who handed candy out to children and abducted them. The child gradually falling prey to abduction, Amanda, in other words, stared and asked in return:

"Compensate?"

"Or you could call it a reward. If you two are able to endure until the final result comes out, I will elucidate any single unknown of your choosing. Any unknown. If it is an unknown that I have yet to find out, I promise upon my honor that I will devote everything at my disposal to seek the answer and render the unknown known."

"..."

Un Izoey and Amanda glanced sideways at him then exchanged glances with each other. Even if Pakuaki said that... What should they do? That was the message included in their gazes.

Pakuaki grinned and then, as though testing something and also watching some kind of good show, he said:

"If you don't believe in them, then we don't need this sort of compensation at all—or if you don't have an unknown that you desire, I'm fine with it too."

The meaning of Amanda and Un Izoey's exchanged gazes began to change as a result the information conveyed by their eyes.

It turned into a feeling infinitely close to resignation.

Un Izoey lightly closed her eyes.

This was a tactful ultimatum. In other words, Pakuaki's message was:

If you are still members of the Lab Chief's Nation, prioritizing the quest for the unknown—

If you still intend to continue as members of the Lab Chief's Nation—Then obey.

Part 6

On that day, he had also served as her opponent early in the morning.

"Kotetsu, what's the matter? 'Tis thy turn."

"Oh, right!"

Due to staring at her face ahead all this time, he had completely failed to notice it was his turn. Glancing at the game of Japanese chess in progress, he pondered for a few seconds before moving one of the pieces.

"Ho, not a bad move."

"Hmm~" Resting her chin on her hand, she began to ponder her next move. Once again, Kotetsu pretended to be pondering the next chess moves while simultaneously glancing at her, his beloved and revered who shared the same owner as him, in other words, Muramasa. How peerlessly beautiful, yet unparalleled in sharpness at the same time. There was a joyful presence of fear. Simply the act of looking at her made him tremble nonstop. All his mind could think of were matters related to her—

(...No good. Truth be told, I must focus on the game.)

Kotetsu deliberately shifted his gaze away from her, meanwhile pondering the pieces' placement and observing the surroundings slightly.

This was the place that their group was using as their base of operations, a solitary detached house out in the countryside, surrounded by trees on all sides almost like a forest. Nevertheless, this was not one of those single-storied houses they were used to inhabiting, nor those modern mass-produced homes. Instead, it would be apt to describe it as a fortress, with a grand and stylish appearance like a castle's, a two-story house built in European style—in other words, a western mansion. After being built by a certain whimsical human, the place had been left abandoned for the long term. Hence, Kotetsu's master had apparently put things in order a little after coming to this country, allowing this venue to serve as a secret base.

Ornate pillars, gargoyles on the roof, a fountain with a statue of a half-naked maiden at its center. Everything was so grand and magnificent, but regrettably, things were also quite aged overall. Some of the walls and pillars were covered with vines and creepers while the grass in the garden was unkempt. To be precise, the non-operational fountain was more of a reservoir.

Kotetsu and Muramasa were seated at a set of chairs and table under a roof, on a terrace that offered a full view of the garden. The entire terrace was predominantly white, decorated with exquisite sculptures of flowers and other carvings. Presumably, it was meant for holding tea parties outdoors.

"Hmm, then I shall try this move."

"I see. Then I'll... move here."

"Ohoh! To think thou wouldst make such a move at this time?!"

Seeing Kotetsu move his piece, Muramasa suddenly slapped her thigh, leaning over the chessboard, looking down at the pieces with great interest—But Kotetsu was in no mood to look at the pieces at all.

"Hah, truly beyond mine expectations. Tarry a moment, I shall think further!"

"P-Please... take your time..."

As usual, Kotetsu was dressed in an adorable outfit he had bought to suit his preferences, a fusion of traditional Japanese and western fashion. Right now, he was not wearing the Shinsengumi haori bought last time in Kyoto. Precisely because it was his favorite, he only wore it on special occasions when he wanted to look particularly impressive. This was prescribed by the strict rules he had established in his heart.

On the other hand, Muramasa had been wearing the same kimono ever since arriving at this western mansion. Namely, the kimono that Kotetsu had bought under orders from her and the master. Naturally, this was also what she was wearing now.

Massive exposure of the bare shoulders. A garment simply hanging in front of a certain part of the chest. A casually tied sash. Legs crossed, she was sitting on a western-style white chair that did not quite suit her image. Due to leaning forward in this state of attire, combined with the up-and-down movement of her knees—How should one put it? There were many things flashing faintly in and out of view. Blushing red in the cheeks, Kotetsu squeezed his knees together tightly and averted his gaze.

"Okay, I know now! I must move the silver general! ...Hmm?"

Kotetsu was thinking he had acted unobtrusively, but she apparently noticed. Putting the chess piece down with a smack, Muramasa noted his appearance and said with a grin:

"Hey Kotetsu, I have made my move. 'Tis thy turn."

"Y-Yes..."

Despite saying that, she leaned forward even more than before, pushing forward a certain object that was about to spill out, resting it on the table. Then changing her cross-legged posture slowly to lift up one knee, she caused her kimono's hem to slide dangerously. A malevolent grin was hanging on her face—

Putting Kotetsu in a state of uncertainty regarding what he should do, Muramasa giggled as though she could not suppress her laughter anymore. Then she casually pulled the part of her kimono in front of her chest.

"Hahaha! Japanese chess is a type of war. What happeneth in war cannot be predicted. And unsettling the enemy is a type of strategy. Such is the case!"

"I-I am not unsettled..."

Embarrassed, Kotetsu did not dare make eye contact with her. Head bowed, he was just about to move his rook when Muramasa launched another surprise attack.

"Yes. Well then, how about a bath together tonight, shall we?"

"Kyah!"

Her surprise attack succeeded. In his confusion, the rook moved a space extra before stopping.

"—I admit defeat."

The surprise attack earlier did have a huge effect, but before that, Kotetsu was already on the losing side. As one would expect, he ended up losing.

"Kotetsu, thou art far too inexperienced."

"I am truly sorry. On the level of child's play, my meager knowledge extends little further than knowing how to move the pieces... I am not worthy to serve as your opponent, Muramasa-sama. I will study to improve myself."

Kotetsu apologized with his head bowed.

"Not to the extent of child's play. I had fun too... Speaking of child's play, there were occasions in the past when I was forced to play chess against mine owner's child. This is already a hundred times better than that."

Kotetsu suddenly narrowed his eyes—this time, truly unobtrusively—and started to sharpen his mind's sensitivity. Was this level of sharpness actually necessary?

"When... did that happen?"

"Hmm? Obviously prior to mine awakening this time... At least the Edo shogunate period, one would expect. That infuriating Tokugawa shogun... Hmm... of which generation?"

Kotetsu secretly sighed again. Currently, she had lost her memories from the most recent two hundred years. In other words, her latest memories should date back to the 1800s. Anything else was unacceptable. Kotetsu decided to confirm it again, slightly.

"By the way, do you like children, Muramasa-sama?"

"Absolutely detested. Brats make too much noise."

She replied instantly, meanwhile yawning as she gazed out into the wasteland of a garden. No change could be seen in her bored eyes. She did not look like she was hiding certain emotions in the depths of her eyes. Neither did she feel that something was amiss.

Kotetsu finally felt relieved. In other words—

"Truth be told, Nirushaaki-sama, she seems to have lost her memory."

"Fufu. It would be troubling to me otherwise."

The current location was a living room in the depths of the mansion. Despite the age of the carpet underfoot, it was evident that the original material was very high-class. In front of Kotetsu, Nirushaaki had sunk her entire self into the sofa, waving the glass in her hand.

"I nonchalantly brought up related terms to provoke her, but apparently did not cause any impetus for her memories to return."

"Excellent."

Nirushaaki tilted the glass towards her mouth. However, its contents was neither wine, water nor juice. Instead, it was a drink she had concocted herself. The ingredients were still lying on the table, including protein packs, bottled supplements, a small bag containing some kind of power, a sheet of tablets for a certain drug, opened capsules...

While chewing the solid substance mixed with the liquid in the glass, Nirushaaki asked:

"Kotetsu, are you getting along harmoniously with Muramasa?"

"How could it possibly not be harmonious?"

Kotetsu answered sincerely. She was the existence he had idolized over the long years. The existence of his dreams. Right now, she was the existence he looked forward to. Staying with her like this was going to confer him with greater power. It would raise his power many times over. He was very certain of that.

"Rather, I feel that we've been together since antiquity. I am convinced that this is the only way of living that ought to exist in the Three Thousand Realms of possibility. I can also assert that the current Nagasone Kotetsu Nyuudou Okisato will not lose to any enemy. This goes even more without saying for Muramasa-sama. She is a blade of slaughter even superior to me. Hence, what lies before us can only be a storm of blood. Trailing in our wake are devastated paths of vermillion. Nirushaaki-sama, with the two of us in your hands, you shall undoubtedly understand the concept of being the strongest."

"My, how exaggerated your words—Nevertheless, I am not displeased. I trust you two very much."

Of course, Kotetsu also swore loyalty to this master from the bottom of his heart. Scarce were the number of humans worthy of owning the two swords of Muramasa and Kotetsu simultaneously. Only a true master on a genuine single-minded quest for strength, an existence capable of providing the greatest battlefields for swords such as him.

I trust you two very much—These simple words echoed in his heart, making him overjoyed.

At this moment, Nirushaaki slammed her emptied glass onto the table.

"Well then, breakfast is over. What next? I have nothing scheduled."

"In that case—"

Kotetsu was interrupted mid-sentence by a yell from afar.

"Hey—Kotetsu~! Master~! 'Tis too boring, are there any activities~!?"

"...Truth be told, Muramasa-sama also seems bored to death. Perhaps we could accompany her to do something together."

"Yes. As postprandial exercise, some slight sparring with her as usual would be nice."

Nirushaaki and Kotetsu walked over to the terrace. Muramasa was lazily entwining her limbs around the chair (leaving Kotetsu no choice but to blush and turn his gaze away), speaking in boredom:

"Oh, ye have arrived. Such utter boredom... Do something. Such as have Kotetsu perform a strip tease or the like."

"M-Me!? Why!?"

"Naturally, because it seemeth amusing. Or else, master, order me to do something. As the owner, thou shouldst feel free to command me. Such as... ordering me to have Kotetsu perform a strip tease or the like."

"So I still have to strip after all!?"

"It would be amusing indeed, I agree—"

"...Please don't agree."

Kotetsu finally groaned but the master continued unfazed:

"But before that, I would like to have some postprandial exercise. Namely, sparring... no..."

Nirushaaki stopped mid-sentence unnaturally and looked up. Kotetsu and Muramasa had noticed a long time ago already.

In a corner of the neglected garden, there was a patch of bushes growing along the wall. If one were to go over this mansion's boundary wall to invade this place, then advance while concealed, this path would be the top choice. Amidst the patch of pitifully neglected bushes, something could be seen.

Muramasa's gaze was directed there. While smiling like a carnivorous predator, she said:

"Fufufu. Excellent, wonderful. Compared to playful sparring between comrades—it looketh like we can now play something much more amusing, a real game."

Part 7

—That person...

—Who is she?

These thoughts were running through Haruaki's mind. His gaze was directed towards a woman ahead. A woman with soft, sleek, fluttering hair beyond shoulder length. A woman dressed in a kimono on the verge of slipping off. This woman was currently chatting, joking around with Kotetsu who was an enemy to Haruaki's side. With neither wariness nor hostility, she gave off vibes as though Kotetsu was her trusted companion, interacting with the enemy in a most natural manner—

Who was she?

"Hey, shameless brat, you idiot! How many times have I told you? Crouch down lower!"

"Hmm~ Ficchi, this can't be helped. Haru doesn't seem to be in any mood to hide. Besides, the other side seems to have discovered us."

"Absolutely ridiculous... All we can do is walk out into the open now."

"Enough, Haruaki! Pull yourself together!"

Pushed from behind, Haruaki emerged with the three girls from the bushes where they were hiding, facing off against the group on the terrace across the neglected garden. However, Haruaki's gaze was still directed towards—

A face that could not be more familiar, yet a certain person who seemed extremely unfamiliar.

No, that's not right. He recognized her. He recognized this person. The first time he saw her, she was dressed the same way. Although the aura she gave off was a little different, in terms of outward appearance, she was identical to right now.

Hence, yes, no mistake—She could only be Konoha.

But not the same. She was not the Konoha who was still by his side several days earlier. Not the Konoha who had gone on the school excursion together with everyone. Not the Konoha who had been living under the same roof until now, trying her best to lift her curse—

"Oh... Verily, such bizarre intruders. Only women and children."

Gazing at them as though for the first time yet speaking an a most familiar voice, the dissonance made Haruaki feel very conflicted.

His mind was spinning. The world lost its sense of reality. The dizzy feeling was surging from the interior of his body. This feeling was as though someone had injected a foul and vulgar movie into his brain, then played it coercively, forcing him to watch against his will. Something must have gone wrong—

The intense dissonance and disappointment was making his body lose balance. But just at this moment, he felt warmth from both his hands respectively, accompanied by a kind of soft sensation.

"Yachi, hang in there. I know this must a huge blow to you... But you must watch. Everything begins here."

On his right was Kirika. Staring straight ahead, she was holding his right hand firmly. Her hand had a concrete presence to it. On the other side, his left hand also felt a tiny hand.

"Hmph, I guess this is what they call skin contact therapy for putting people at ease. What a pain for others!"

For some reason, Fear was pouting as she spoke while holding his hand. At the same time, something soft and gentle was scratching his back and flank lightly.

"Then I'll also use recovery tickling play to help heal Haru's psychological damage. Next, all that's left is the adults-only version where you have to take off all your clothes... Haru, are you okay?"

Haruaki felt his vision's center of gravity stabilize suddenly. Forces from three directions were anchoring his consciousness in the real world.

"...Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks, everyone."

"Okay~"

Kuroe answered cheerfully, probably a deliberate act, then withdrew her hair from Haruaki's body. Exerting slightly more pressure while she gripped his hand, Kirika stared ahead. Those eyes of hers, watching Konoha, narrowed for an instant.

"...No reaction after seeing this scene huh...? This is also... Ah, how absolutely ridiculous..."

After murmuring these words softly, Kirika gently released Haruaki's hand, slightly disappointed. On the other hand, Fear threw his hand away as though shaking him off, taking out her Rubik's cube instead.

"Damn Cow Tits... How dare you look at us with eyes like that. It's almost like..."

Thanks to everyone's support, Haruaki was able to steady his stance at least. Gulping, he firmed his spirit and stared directly at her—staring at the one who was watching them with belligerent and vigorous eyes as Fear had pointed out.

All he could do was... call out to her.

"Konoha... Konoha!"

"Huh? What befell a tree's leaves?"^[1]

She simply tilted her head in puzzlement, surveying her surroundings casually, wondering where she could find a rare, withered tree. Seeing her attitude, Haruaki felt assaulted by something akin to a wave of nausea, but—

"That's your name, Konoha. Have you forgotten?"

"Never heard of it."

"H-Hurry and remember! You are Konoha! Staying in my house, you were living together with us! Look here, Fear and Class Rep are also classmates who go to school with us together!"

"As I have said, never heard of it."

She waved her hand in irritation and began to show signs of impatience. Nevertheless, Haruaki could not stop speaking.

"You... were only forced by a cursed tool's power to forget us. The real you isn't like this!"

"Kono-san. Kono-san, you're only being used."

"Indeed. This is all a conspiracy conducted by those standing around you right now. An absolutely ridiculous pretense, only for the sake of obtaining your power. You should hurry and remember."

"Cow Tits, you should be the same as us. Holding misgivings about your own power, then trying to lift your curse—"

Hearing Fear speaking, Konoha narrowed her eyes sharply and reacted.

"Cow Tits, didst thou say? Little lass... Clearly 'tis our first encounter, yet thou art addressing me rather impudently. Ha! I see now, witnessing thy flat appearance, I can understand, thou must be overwhelmed by jealousy towards my bosom, art thou not? Given thy washboard, 'tis impossible to satisfy yonder brat in the bedroom, isn't it?"

"Guh... W-What are you talking about!? What rubbish are you saying!? I-I'll curse you!"

Looking at it from a different perspective, this could be considered one of their usual conversations, but it was still different. It was merely similar on a superficial level. Most regrettably, there was something diametrically different on a decisive and fundamental level regarding their current conversation, compared to the usual exchanges in the living room.

Konoha grew increasingly impatient and scratched her head in an offhand manner, causing her bosom to wobble and almost spill out from her kimono. However, she made no effort to reach out and cover up.

"No matter what... I recognize ye not. Even if what ye say is true, my current self knoweth naught, hence 'tis completely meaningless."

"Konoha...!"

"Besides—One of ye little lasses said just now. I am being used? Their objective is my power? ...So what?"

Konoha stopped scratching her head. With her face tilted to one side, she cast Haruaki's group a gaze of scorn and said:

"Elite weapons ought to be owned by elite humans. Humans seek evermore excellent tools whilst I seek evermore excellent wielders. In this regard, thou seemst to be nothing more than an ordinary brat. Why must one such as I become the possession of a human this weak?"

"No... That's wrong, you weren't like this to begin with—"

"My current master is worthy of my respect. Especially the master's bloodstained hands, reeking of battlefields and innards, bloodied even beneath the nails. Brat, if thou considerest thyself more suitable an

owner... Waste no more words. All thou needst do is show me your power!"

Baring her teeth, she laughed, maliciously, joyfully, terrifyingly. Arching her back slightly, shifting her center of gravity forward, dangling her arms naturally—She entered a combat stance.

Haruaki felt his brain shaking again. Don't collapse—He reminded himself, recalling the warmth from Fear and Kirika's hands. But he was unable to stop his heart from crying out silently—Why? How!? She's Konoha. Despite clearly being Konoha, she's not Konoha. Why—

"Haruaki, are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah."

"You can space out all you want later. Cow Tits aside, those people around her are undoubtedly enemies. A known enemy and an unknown enemy. Stay on high alert!"

Hearing Fear, only then did Haruaki become aware of the two people standing by Konoha's side. However, this was perhaps just an kind of escape for him, unable to look at Konoha any longer.

One of the enemies was Kotetsu who gave off the same impression as during the school excursion. Although not identical to back then, Kotetsu was still dressed in a frilly Wa Lolita outfit. Hands curled into the form of tiger claws, Kotetsu was glaring with fangs bared at the intruders.

The other person was also someone they had seen before, yet never seen as well.

Relatively petite and skinny in build, she was dressed in a navy-blue tight skirt with a suit jacket. But instead of looking new and ironed, her suit was creased as though she had been sleeping in these clothes for many days. Rather than uncouth, conveying more of a upfront temperament of non-pretense, her hair was no longer tied up as in the past. Naturally curly, her wavy hair extended and meandered down her back like a small black snake. Her entire person gave of a presence of mature seductiveness and confident composure.

"Waste no more words, all that is required is a show of power, is that so...? Fufu, these are words that truly suit us."

"Hmm? Art thou praising me?"

"Yes. Truth be told, I agree with you completely."

"...So, you people can probably guess from my presence, but I shall let you see for your own eyes."

Despite her sharp gaze, the woman's facial features were rather child-like. Nevertheless, as soon as she fished out a pair of glasses with massive swirling lines on the lenses from her pocket and put them on—She turned completely into a face that Haruaki and everyone else used to see every day.

Haruaki's group all groaned spontaneously together.

"Sen... sei?"

"Absolutely ridiculous..."

"Sagisaki!"

"That used to be my name. As a side note, unlike that auxiliary from the Knights' Dominion, this is the face I was born with."

"Tsk! Your manner of speaking and airs are totally different from before...!"

"I establish my personality through hypnosis akin to self-brainwashing. As a warrior intending to reach the dragon's side, one must be capable of such a trivial task, naturally. Any soldier heading out for the battlefield would be capable of this."

Using her fingertip to give the large swirl glasses an upwards push as though finding them in the way, she continued:

"I shall state clearly. My name is Nirushaaki. Ranked second of the Draconians. Corresponding part is the «Wings»."

Fear, Kirika and Kuroe entered battle stances, glaring at her with maximum wariness. Ranking second implied that she was stronger than any member of the Draconians they had encountered thus far, whether Satsuko, Fourteen, or Kokoro Pentangeli.

"Thank you for going out of your way to introduce yourself~ But we know already."

"Hoh... But then again, that is quite conceivable given you were able to find my hiding place. Do you know everything already?"



Nirushaaki spoke calmly. Biting his lip, Haruaki answered:

"There are many things we don't know...! Why did you do this!? Return Konoha to us!"

"I have already stated clearly. I do not recall ever being thy possession."

"Pay it no mind, Muramasa. Well then, Yachi Haruaki, I shall answer you on account of our former relationship as teacher and pupil. Our objective is very simple. It is simply something that all members of the Draconians would do very naturally."

"You people seek strength, which is why you need to get your hands on Konoha huh...? But that alone isn't an explanation. What are you doing here?"

"My reason for staying at this mansion is also very simple. After obtaining Muramasa, my preparations are complete. What needs to be done—namely, to reach the dragon's side—requires defeating the existence nearest to the dragon, so as to devour his flesh and blood. That is all. Simply stated, I must surpass the Commander."

Fear frowned and groaned.

"Commander... In other words, your boss?"

"Precisely. I have conveyed my intent and summoned the Commander to this place. We are currently waiting here."

"Summoned...?"

"Because it is difficult for us to reach the Commander's side."

They called him over? Feeling puzzled, Haruaki muttered quietly, causing Nirushaaki to answer while moving her shoulders as though shrugging lightly. Then—

"The Commander's arrival will still take some time. Roughly a week, Kotetsu?"

"That is what I believe."

"Consequently, we are currently pondering how to pass time. As preparatory exercise before a crucial showdown, perhaps this arrives with perfect timing—"

Hence, when Nirushaaki and Kotetsu exchanged nods, then faced Haruaki's group again—

When she pushed her glasses and stared at them directly with her extremely sharp eyes—

Haruaki felt goosebumps all over his back. Feeling an invisible sense of pressure, he instantly sense the surrounding air change in nature. Fear and the girls also took defensive stances, greatly alarmed.

"Slow down, master. Confronted with such weak-looking opponents, if we were to mobilize in full force, this shall end in an instant, shall it not? 'Twould be rather lacking in amusement."

"Hmm? You do seem to make a fair point."

"Hence, could the current chance to play be yielded to me, the most bored one? Master, thou just ate, didst thou not? Exercising immediately would not be good for the body."

"That is precisely why I wish for postprandial exercise—But no matter. I shall leave things to you currently, but please exercise caution."

"Thou suggesteth I exercise caution to avoid striking too heavily, yes? Pray not intervene. The same goeth for Kotetsu."

"Eh? Umm, Muramasa-sama, I can also..."

"I can play with thee any time."

"...I understand..."

Contrary to Haruaki's wish and expectation, Konoha was the only one stepping forward.

There was not the slightest mercy in her aura. Like those two—those two in the enemy camp—an unambiguous atmosphere of conflict and violence was exuding from her shoulders. Step by step, she was approaching them.

Stop—Haruaki thought. Why must they fight Konoha? Why were their words unable to reach Konoha? Had she really... really forgotten them—?

"En garde! Well then—I shall commence!"

Konoha tilted herself forward all at once, accelerating towards them. The gorgeous kimono's hem fluttered as a result, exposing the majority of her

thighs. Without resorting to any petty tricks, this was a straight-line attack intending to confirm their reactions.

"This fool... Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi»!"

Fear transformed the Rubik's cube and blocked Konoha's barehanded strike, engaging in close quarters combat.

"Cow Tits...! Don't you recognize this? It's me!"

"Little lass, thou still persistest in addressing me with a displeasing name!"

"You've seen this weapon before, right!?"

"How ugly a sword... No, 'tis a hatchet? To think thou wouldst use such a thing to fight me, how ludicrous!"

Konoha stabbed with a knifehand strike from her other hand. Fear jumped back then devoted all her efforts in using the hatchet to block the series of attacks that followed immediately.

"Oh? Despite the ludicrous weapon, thy skills are sufficient to fight me on equal terms."

"Stop looking down on others! If you continue to make jokes, I'll have no choice but to show my true abilities!"

"Fear..."

Watching from the sidelines, Haruaki could understand. Despite retorting with a brave face, Fear was actually fighting a tough battle. Every movement of hers was filled with hesitation, weighted down by doubt. In contrast, Konoha had not the slightest confusion. Like an uncaged beast, she was swinging her limbs freely and boldly without reservation. Just as she lowered her stance like a carnivorous predator, in the next second, she jumped up high like a ferocious bird of prey, then immediately leaning her body back like a scorpion to attack Fear.

"Kuha, how now how now!? Despite thy presumptuous words, thou movest sluggishly! Art thou holding back out of certain concerns?"

"And whose fault... do you think it is...!? Mechanism No.22 bludgeoning type, spike-ball form: «Morgenstern»!"

"Oh, a club!? To think 'twould be a transformable toy, what a delight. Regrettably, little lass, thy abilities are not so vaunted—Hmm!"

"«Tragic Black River»!"

"Mode: «Killing Machine Masakado»!"

To aid Fear, Kirika and Kuroe extended their belt and hair respectively, but Konoha simply spun around as though dancing, effortlessly severing the belt and the hair.

"Excellent excellent, stand strong united. Join forces all ye like to attack me... Hmm, is the brat over there refraining from action? Whatever, no matter."

Haruaki could feel nothing except his immobile legs. He was unable to move even though he wanted to, even though he could see Konoha displaying definite hostility towards Fear and attacking with definite intent to harm her, even though he could see Kirika and Kuroe working arduously, trying their best to hinder Konoha's movement.

A dream-like feeling descended again. Was it because Konoha kept jumping around? The warmth of human skin contact therapy, which Fear and the others had transmitted to him definitely, was gradually absorbed by the coldness of the faded world surrounding them as well as the vacuum of a lifeless daydream. Naturally, the dream was a nightmare, a world beyond his reach. A movie whose plot made the audience anxious as though sitting on a pincushion. Legs immobilized, after losing warmth, he next began to tremble, of course. As though shuddering, shaking nonstop. He did not want to watch. Something must have gone wrong. Stop it now. Please, stop this now—

"Hmm, since three are the number of opponents, 'tis fine for me to go serious a little? I shall exercise caution to avoid ending things accidentally!"

However, the cruelty did not stop.

Konoha's speed went further up a level, rapidly switching between action and inaction. Just when she seemed like she stopped, she would move nimbly like a carnivorous plant without any warning with unpredictable timing. Feints and actual attacks were interspersed. Just as Haruaki saw Konoha launch dozens of direct attacks at the torture wheel that Fear had raised up high as a shield, in the next instant, she dropped down and suddenly stabbed with her knife hand from a dead angle. Fear retreated

frantically, a slender trail of blood appearing on her thigh. Kirika and Kuroe extended their belt and hair to stop Konoha, but a sword's traits proved to be too much of an advantage. Imbuing her arms and legs with a sword's characteristics, she sliced through the belt and hair one after another. A bundle of Kuroe's hair flew past the vicinity of Konoha's face then brushed past the side of her mouth. Konoha grinned with savagery and bit down, severing the hair. "No way—" Kuroe groaned.

Konoha did not stop attacking Fear. Running, jumping, flying, walking, spinning, stopping, reclining, mocking, kneeling, laughing with delight, launching frontal assaults, attacking from dead angles, halting the offensive then immediately attacking again, speaking vulgarly, dancing gracefully, opening her jaws like a beast, groping while covering her bosom that might fly out of her kimono any time as though showing off to Fear—

In this manner...

Harming Fear's body.

Covering Fear's body with freshblood.

Although none of the wounds were critical, Fear was definitely not unharmed. Beginning to pant, her shoulders heaved up and down while she furrowed her brow as though in pain.

Fear only kept defending. Yes, indeed, even Fear was unable to attack proactively, despite displaying belligerent incompatibility in their usual interactions.

Nevertheless, Konoha was completely unconcerned, treating the girls as enemies encountered for the first time—attacking Fear mercilessly. So painful. This felt extremely painful to Haruaki.

(Hurry... Stop this... Stop this now...!)

But of course, the voice in Haruaki's heart could not reach anyone's ears.

Fear raised the spiked metal board of «Maranatha» to use as a shield but Konoha attacked as she pleased with slicing attacks from her arms and legs as though facing a soft sandbag, transmitting waves of impacts to Fear's petite body.

"G-Guh...!"

"There there there. Oh dear, who could have expected thee to be so durable? I was thinking thou wouldst break after a few times. To be this sturdy, even I can't help but feel sincerely impressed. Although if I were to use attack with my true sword, 'twould be a different matter—Yes. Well then, how about it? Let us have a pure contest of strength next."

Konoha spread her legs slightly and used both hands to grip the left and right sides of «Maranatha», then proceeding to lean her body weight forwards. Supporting «Maranatha» against her shoulder, Fear's face changed dramatically.

"Damn it, how dare you look down on me! I don't care... what's gonna happen...!"

"Hoho. 'Tis coming. But thou shouldst be able to endure further, yes?"

The two girls were pushing at each other with a spiked metal board between them. Although Konoha was gripping the board by the edges, clearly she was at a disadvantage with the spiked surface facing her. Compared to Fear who could push with all her body weight without reservation, Konoha's position was very disadvantageous.

Nevertheless, they were evenly matched at the moment. No, not exactly. The balance between them was gradually collapsing. Despite sneak attacks from behind, conducted by Kirika's «Tragic Black River» and Kuroe's hair, trying to create openings; despite the fact that Konoha simply shook her shoulders to sever the belt and the hair without a single glance—

Fear was gradually retreating instead.

"Ultimately, it boileth down to strength for settling the match. 'Twould be that, thou art too small after all."

"Guh! Th-This bitch...!"

Konoha grinned maliciously, licking her lips, gripping the spiked metal board's edges even harder.

Then maintaining this action, she forcefully straightened her back.

Leaning her head slightly backwards, then after storing energy—

"Especially... Thy flat chest, truly pitiful beyond limit! Thou wouldst do well to reincarnate in a new life, little lass with breasts of a child!"

Neither hesitating nor reducing her force—

Konoha performed a headbutt towards the metal board with countless giant spikes.

A sharp metallic clang thundered from the impact, resounding to the heavens.

"Guhhhh!?"

"Haha!"

Together with «Maranatha», Fear was sent flying. The spikes had failed to pierce Konoha's head. Without the slightest swelling on her forehead, Konoha jeered with delight from the bottom of her heart, coldly and mercilessly like a devil.

Fear collapsed on the ground, perhaps because her legs no longer had the strength to stand or the impact just now was too unexpected. Pinned down by the weight of «Maranatha», she turned in back into the Rubik's cube for now. At this moment, Konoha took a leap, causing her kimono's hem to flutter.

"!"

Then she landed on top of Fear who was lying on the ground. Using one foot to step on Fear's right hand that was holding the Rubik's cube, she pinned down Fear's left arm with her other foot. In other words, she was standing astride Fear. Maintaining this position, Konoha bent forward and wagged her finger ostentatiously before Fear's eyes. Her expression was split evenly between mockery and disappointment.

"What is this? How boring. All that vigor and pomp, yet such a pitiful showing in the end?"

"G-Guh...!"

"Fear-kun!"

"Ficchi!"

Kirika and Kuroe's frantic rescues could not reach Fear. Fanning her hand as though the weather was hot, Konoha simply waved her hand to effortlessly sever the belt and hair. The two girls extended their weapons

again, attempting to pull Fear back to them, but all was futile in the face of Konoha's knife hand.

"Go ahead and use thy secret moves, if thou still posesseth any? At this rate, 'twould be utterly boring."

"...Come on."

"Hmm?"

Despite panting heavily, Fear still did not take her eyes off Konoha. After Konoha questioned in return, Fear bit her lip for an instant before yelling one more time:

"Come on, put on some underwear at least! You abominable Cow Tits!"

Staring at Konoha's lower body while she stood astride her, Fear continued to scream and yell. "You're too shameless! So shameless that you even rival the shameless brat. Your existence itself is shameless!" As though deliberately ignoring the mood at hand, as though hoping someone else could read the mood, so as to give the answer she was hoping for.

But Konoha simply murmured softly:

"What, it appeareth that 'tis over... Well then, thou shalt be killed."

The disappointment on her face deepened. Her eyes showed absolute disinterest.

Haruaki knew that Konoha was serious.

Hence, he finally succeeded in making a sound. Although it was a lame, trembling voice, but at least it was better than silence. He believed this to be the case.

"W-Wait wait... Hold on! Hey Konoha, she's Fear. That's Fear!"

"The name of this lass? Hmm, I know now. But soon enough, this name shall be needed no longer."

"What are you talking about!? Stop it, stop it now... I'm begging you...!"

None of the words that Haruaki had forced out desperately were reaching her.

She was no longer looking at Haruaki, even to the point of losing awareness of him. As though treating him as a pebble on the roadside, she quietly murmured thoughtlessly to herself: "What a bizarre brat."

Pounding, Haruaki felt his heart beat violently. What should he do?

At this rate, Fear—

Fear was going to be—

KILLED. BY. KONOHA.

(Ha—)

What a ludicrous arrangement of words. Finding the corners of his mouth twitching slightly, Haruaki very well might have laughed out for real. Impossible. This could not happen. Because it's Fear and Konoha. It's those two. Something must be mistaken. Definitely, definitely, definitely, definitely, definitely, definitely so. Right?

Nevertheless, this was reality.

As though drawing a bow, Konoha raised her knife hand up to her chest, the hand which was originally in front of Fear's face.

As though believing something, as though wanting to believe something, Fear stared straight at Konoha in front of her.

Then the bow was drawn to its limit.

The readied arrow, known as the knife hand, finally shot out—

"...Oh my?"

Konoha's knife hand simply wavered once then remained still.

Making a sound of puzzlement, she no longer looked downwards at Fear. The same went for Kotetsu and Nirushaaki who were observing from the side. Same for Haruaki's group.

—Incomprehensible. Haruaki's group could not even comprehend whether they were surrounded by a crisis or not.

But the only thing certain was that the situation had changed.

Before they knew it...

New intruders had appeared in this mansion's garden.

Numbering at least ten of them.

Chapter 2 - The Foolish Entity Known as the Weak; Its Sin / "The blade - It's ferocious"

Part 1

That group of people gave off an exceedingly simple impression.

Namely, a bunch of extreme misfits.

Exactly as the word implied in its truest sense, these people's presence was very unsuited to this place, generally speaking.

Standing there was a group of young men, ranging in age from teens to the twenties. Vulgar men that one could find anywhere, truly anywhere. With hair either dyed blond or brown, they each had hairstyles of their own preference. There were dreadlocks as well as shaved heads. Some of them had ear, nose or tongue piercings, some were wearing a jangling set of bling and some were wearing sunglasses—In any case, the only thing common to them all was the oppressive presence exuded by their appearances. Judging from the way they interacted with one another, they seem to be mutually acquainted. The group looked like a street gang or a delinquent mob.

However, they had made their sudden appearance at this venue, one that was dominated by the supernatural. Perhaps the sense of dissonance from their ordinary appearances could not be judged by common sense. After all, the members of the Family had disguised themselves as ordinary people to visit Kuroe's beauty parlor in the past. It was impossible to tell purely from appearances alone. In other words, the superficial level of appearances could simply imply that these were people involved in the world of cursed tools but had dressed up as ordinary folk to lead ordinary lives.

Was this group one of those types? Then which organization did they belong to? A known organization? Or one that was unknown? The only answer ruled out as impossible was that they were ordinary people who intruded by coincidence.

This was because they were each carrying weapons such as steel pipes or metal bats.

They seemed to have entered normally through the main door. The group was standing in a row at the garden's entrance, sweeping their excited

gazes over everyone present. Haruaki's group had no choice but to look warily at the new arrivals as well as Nirushaaki's trio. Naturally, this resulted in a triangular situation between three factions.

Nirushaaki's trio also gazed in puzzlement and wariness at these people. Their eyes seemed to be saying—These people could not possibly be totally uninvolved. Surely, they must have come for some kind of intent and purpose. Which organization were they from?

At this moment, one of the men turned slightly towards one of his companions and asked:

"—What now?"

"What do you mean, what now? Now that we're here, let's do it."

"Yeah. And just as we heard, they seem to be doing bad things. Even bullying that foreign chick there."

"So we're the heroes of justice now? Hahaha!"

"Heroes of justice, that's way too cool, man. Then just like we agreed, try to go one at a time?"

"Okay, then I'm up first! I'm gonna punish that sexy lady who's bullying others, heehee!"

"That's cuz you've got a thing for big boobs."

"Shut da fuck up! Guys, why dontcha decide now who's gonna punish who next!?"

As soon as one of the bat-wielding men finished speaking, he yelled vigorously: "Okay~ Here I go—!" while charging forward. His target was Nirshaaki's group, in particular, Konoha was who standing the most forward.

Haruaki noticed that Konoha's eyes had been glaring sharply all this while, but for the first time, she widened her eyes in puzzlement. Still stepping on Fear's body, she tilted her head slightly and said:

"Oh my... What is going on hither?"

The man approached her. As Haruaki watched, the silhouette of the man's back blocked Konoha from sight as he raised his baseball bat high. Then Konoha's voice was heard next.

"This fellow—Verily, an amateur."

At the same time, blood was splattered.

In the next instant, Konoha returned to Haruaki's view. This happened because the man had collapsed on the spot in an effeminate sitting posture, looking totally incompetent. Naturally, the splattering blood came from the man's body, a long, deep gash running diagonally from his shoulder straight to his hip.

"H-Huh...?"

"Indeed, 'tis a reaction from the distant past. Due to the excessive sharpness of my blade, many fodder peasants in militias, unused to war, failed to notice they had been cut. Only when they looked down in puzzlement upon their own bodies did they realize their lives were about to be extinguished, those visages were particularly exhilarating—"

"Ah, ah... Eeeeek—!"

"Verily indeed, 'tis the visage."

Screaming. Screaming. Screaming. Bathed in blood, the man rolled on the ground. Tossed away, his bat fell to the ground. Already sliced to pieces by the sword, the bat broke into a million pieces upon hitting the ground.

"Cow... Tits...!"

"Ohoh!"

Konoha suddenly straightened up and retreated. This was due to Fear, who had been pinned under her, had transformed the Rubik's cube into a hatchet of execution. With an upwards swing, she freed herself from being Konoha's captive.

"Yes, I was taken aback because this fellow is too amateurish, resulting in a small opening. If this was deliberate part of ye plans, I could commend ye for executing a cunning plan. Even though 'tis quite roundabout."

"How... No way...!"

Still not yet recovered from the injuries from the fight with Konoha so far, Fear was panting heavily, standing unsteadily, her entire body covered with bleeding cuts. Holding the hatchet in a stance to restrain Konoha, she

slowly backed away, finally reuniting with Haruaki and the rest of their group.

Nevertheless, Haruaki, Kirika and Kuroe did not have the luxury of chatting with Fear, because simply trying to comprehend the situation was consuming their full effort.

"H-Hey, look what happened to Take...!"

"This is totally bonkers, bonkers, man! But I can't believe that bitch dared to get violent, what the fuck did she do!? Hey, what're you guys waiting for, hurry your asses!"

One of the men roared and howled, forcing himself to get pumped, then charging forward with a metal pipe. He was probably trying to save his buddy. Presumably provoked by his words, two or three other men followed after him.

"—Truth be told, these are all trash standing in our way. Well then, this humble Kotetsu shall assist in cleaning up."

"Very well, there is no reason to decline."

"Well then—" Kotetsu took a leap on the spot, landing in front of the men within the blink of an eye. With a casual swipe of the tiger claw, the men's metal pipe and other weapons instantly fell apart in pieces at the same time.

"Eeeek—W-What's with this chick?!"

"What the fuck? She's unarmed, what the fuck!? I can't believe it got sliced!"

Haruaki listened to them in shock. Why were they making these kinds of remarks now? Konoha also called them amateurs just now. Were they uninvolved people? Did Haruaki and the others misunderstand? Or these guys made a mistake somewhere? If they really were delinquents, merely a group of people uninvolved with the world of cursed tools, Haruaki could not understand at all why they were here. Totally incomprehensible.

Konoha turned her head lazily and inquired behind her:

"Master, allow me to ask, just in case. May I kill these people?"

"It is truly unbelievable how amateurish they are. It might be necessary to question them afterwards. In any case, make sure they retain the ability to speak, at least."

"Yes, after all, one couldeth kill them any time. Understood."

"Furthermore, the two of you ought to have curses, yes? This is an excellent opportunity—Enjoy the meal."

"Tis wonderful to have such an understanding master."

"This humble Kotetsu concurs."

Konoha and Kotetsu grinned with savagery as they faced forward.

Then immediately, they sprang into action at the same time. First, Kotetsu amputated two men's arms at the same time with a swipe of the tiger claw. Flying past, Konoha stabbed a knifehand strike into a third man's thigh. The three men screamed unpleasantly as they collapsed on the ground.

The men seemed to be understanding by now. They seemed to have realized that these two were not opponents they could handle on their own. Instantly, the group panicked.

"W-Wait, I was never told, I never heard that it'd be like this!"

"This is no fucking joke! Argh, come take this!"

Some of them turned around and ran while others gripped their weapons tightly with trembling hands. Some even collapsed on the spot. These people were all food for the swords.

"Guh... Ah... I don't really get what's going on, but we must save them...!"

"Fear, don't force yourself! You're hurt!"

Despite gripping her torture instrument tightly, Fear was stumbling around dangerously. Haruaki and the others caught her body and steadied her.

"It might only be a comforting effect, but I'll wrap up the deeper wounds first with my hair. Stay still, Ficchi."

However, Haruaki's group could only watch from the sidelines as the scene unfolded gradually before their eyes.

A banquet of splattering blood. Kotetsu and Konoha were attacking the men.

Against a backdrop of red, they leapt and danced.

Fragments of flesh and screams flew all over the place. The men swung their weapons desperately, but with a single turn of the body, Kotetsu knocked all their weapons to the ground, skirt fluttering as though in mockery. Only then did the men realize their fingers had already been chopped off. Using one hand to catch a knife the enemy was stabbing with in desperation, Konoha crushed the blade in her bare hand. Then saying "Thou canst have it back," she grabbed the man's hand forcefully in a handshake, pressing all of the blade fragments into the palm of his hand.

"Fufu... Haha! Look, oh my, what a vigorous group of leaping youngsters! Blood flowing out in such vigor, gushing, gushing, gushing! Haha, useless they may be, yet seeing their bleeding so vigorous, one cannot help but wonder if their semen down under gusheth out with the same vigor? Making girls cry every night, do they not?"

"Muramasa-sama, please refrain from excessive vulgarity."

"Why not? 'Tis fresh blood, a long-awaited sight. Yet if one had to criticize, the color of these fellows' blood seemeth to be lacking. Goodness knoweth what they eat for their everyday diet."

"Truth be told, this humble Kotetsu concurs. Surely they must be stuffing themselves with the convenient nourishment known as fast food."

Answering, Kotetsu lightly raised a blood-splattered hand.

"Most likely this is the reason why the taste is inferior to blood from the past. But perhaps I am just viewing past memories through rose-tinted glasses."

Then Kotetsu licked the fresh blood stuck to her fingers.

Extending her bright red tongue, she used her mucous membranes to wipe away the red color on her finger. Not satisfied with that, she inserted her finger directly into her mouth, thrusting it in and out slightly, producing faint slurps while licking, savoring in her mouth before swallowing down the depths of her throat. Exhaling deeply as though she had just drank a large of volume in one breath, Kotetsu spoke with slightly reddened cheeks:

"Nevertheless—It can't be said to be not delicious."

"Fufu, how wonderful... By the way, that fellow by your feet as well as that one yonder, they have stopped breathing, have they not?"

"Oh, their hearts have stopped, indeed. To think I thought I was holding back already..."

"Simply a little intestinal exposure, nothing more. How incompetent, to think one would die in such a manner. Insufficient fighting spirit, presumably—But a mere two deaths should not incur our master's disapproval. 'Tis meet if we think of this as two donors who shan't complain no matter how much blood is drunk, yes?"

"Truth be told, the blood of corpses rapidly deteriorates in taste. Let's find another."

A scene of insanity. A dialogue of insanity.

This is wrong—thinking that to himself, Haruaki suppressed the turbulent urge to vomit, rising from the depths of his stomach. While his vision was turning blurry for some reason, he was thinking that to himself.

Isn't it wrong? Konoha, isn't it wrong? Why are you unfazed by the sight of fresh blood? Why do you look so happy? Why are you smiling and trembling with excitement?

You—You're supposed to be... very afraid of blood... instead.

You're supposed to feel like vomiting as soon as you see blood, your whole body shaking to almost collapse... Instead?

Konoha. Konoha. That's the Konoha I know. Absolutely. That's Konoha.

Ah, but if the scene I'm witnessing before my eyes right now is reality...

If this sense of nausea, revulsion and despair is real...

Then that person over there, truly, completely, is no longer the Konoha I know—

"Muramasa-sama, how is the situation?"

"Fufufu, 'tis providing me with merriment. The master watching the show should feel this too... Because my curse is exceedingly simple, namely, a desire to see blood."

"My curse is also very simple."

"We are both simple weapons and tools, hence, 'tis only natural. No matter what, this long-awaited banquet of blood is not bad at all. Be that as it may, if one were to be slightly more greedy, the fresh blood of formidable foes one hath defeated would be even more beautiful a sight, even more exhilarating."

"I agree that the blood of strong enemies is more delicious."

"Blood flowing across the ground, blood flying through the air, blood dripping across the skin, frothing blood, blood splattering together with internal organs... Myriad different styles. This sight of thee, drinking blood, feeleth different from usual, quite interesting. Thou drinkest blood, I watch. In light of that, perhaps the two of us might be quite compatible."

"C-Compatible, you say...? Th-That would be my honor..."

Kotetsu blushed awkwardly, his shoulders shaking mildly. At the same time, she swept a shade of red, even more vivid than that of her face, towards the back of an escaping man.

Haruaki felt like vomiting even more. Wrong, this is so wrong.

Although it was a one-sided massacre, Konoha and Kotetsu were perhaps getting a bit lax due to boredom. A man had been sitting collapsed on the ground from the beginning, trembling in a corner all this time. At this moment, seizing the opportunity while they were conversing, while Kotetsu had gone off to eradicate another man who was trying to escape at the same time, this man fled. With an unsteady gait, stepping over pools of blood, he ran straight ahead. By the time Kotetsu looked back, he was already out of the garden, reaching a location that would free him of this mansion as soon as he went through the front door—

At this moment, he halted.

Intending to chase after him, Kotetsu also stopped, frowning.

This was because a figure had blocked the way in front of the fleeing man. A hooded figure wrapped entirely in a filthy mass of fabric. The figure's face was hidden under the hood.

Just as Haruaki expected the man to seek help from the figure—

"W-W-What the fuck is going on here!?"

He lost his temper with a trembling, cowardly and shrill voice.

The hooded figure answered with a woman's voice.

Using a low and calm tone of voice, almost akin to murmuring, she said:

"I have already paid."

"Yeah right, like hell a million yen per person is enough for this crazy mess!
No fucking way!"

"Not my concern. You were the ones who accepted it."

"You said they were all young women and we could do whatever we want
to them...!"

"Exactly as I said, you may violent them or otherwise as you please.
Provided you get the job done first."

"Fucking shit! You never told me they'd be monsters like this! What the
fuck, what are pulling, bitch—Damn it! Stop screwing around, save me,
take my place...!"

The man pounced on the hooded figure as though he had finally passed
his limit. This action was probably motivated by anger as well as his desire
to be saved. Nevertheless—

As though proclaiming that this was connected to the same space as
where Konoha and Kotetsu were occupying...

As though proclaiming to him that he had not escaped a single step from
the scene of carnage at all...

The sword's piercing tip exited from the man's back.

"...Huh?"

The man stared at his own chest in puzzlement, looking at the sword that
had stabbed deeply into his chest. Then trembling, he looked up, towards
the hooded figure—

"No matter what... You people have experienced terror fully. My objective
is fulfilled."

"Huh... Afff...?"

Still showing a face as though he had no idea what was going on, the man's body slid down. Reaching out as though calling for help, as though making a final plea, he grabbed the fabric wrapped around the figure.

Naturally, as the man fell, the piece of fabric came loose and slid off as well.

The hood came off, exposing the figure's face—

Haruaki and the others had also seen it before.

"..."

Expressionless, as though unconcerned at all that her face was exposed...

As though unconcerned that she had just murdered an uninvolved and helpless human being...

She—

The knight from the Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion, Lilyhowell Kilmister, stood there without saying a word.

Part 2

Lilyhowell Kilmister had made her appearance together with Neto the Avenger at Taishyuu High, intending to defeat Nirushaaki. However, it turned out to be a trap of misinformation laid by Nirushaaki, resulting in Lilyhowell escaping with an auxiliary in defeat. That was the extent of the information that Haruaki's faction knew first hand.

However, they had also obtained further information indirectly later on. Yesterday, Un Izoey had also mentioned the Knights' Dominion slightly. The tool used for erasing Konoha's memory had originally belonged to the Dominion. Nirushaaki had lured them to Taishyuu High because she wanted to steal that tool. After Lilyhowell and the auxiliary fled the school, Nirushaaki had robbed them directly.

Haruaki recalled facing off against her during the previous incident.

The head of lustrous blonde hair, tied behind her head in a ponytail. A gallant and dignified expression on her face at all times. Silver-white armor that seemed to symbolize nobility and purity. The greatsword designed

only for the purpose of breaking Wathes. Lilyhowell was indeed an enemy, but she was also a woman whose image was that of a "knight among knights," as though forbidding all deviations from the right path, as though scornful of cowardice and underhandedness.

However, she was no longer the same, whether in appearance or the atmosphere around her.



With her hair untied, her whole person exuded an air of disorder. Even the blonde hair looked slightly dull. Was it soiled from dust and dirt?

Indeed, her entire person was filthy. The piece of fabric originally wrapped around her was probably a cape, but due to excessive filth, it looked like a rag.

The silver-white armor on her body had also lost its shine, currently exhibiting a dull luster like that of scrap metal—More precisely, the remaining half. The armor equipped on her was missing its top half while the breechcloth was also riddled with many large tears. On her upper body, she was wearing a fitted, long-sleeved garment similar to what one would wear as underwear beneath armor. Furthermore, there were a number of belts wrapped around her upper torso, horizontally and diagonally, squeezing the distinct curves of the bulging bosom beneath her underwear, drawing further attention to it.

And all of those belts were—

Sword straps.

Noticing the many silhouettes protruding from behind her, it took a moment before Haruaki realized those were sword straps.

Many scabbards and hilts could be seen behind Lilyhowell's back. Carried crisscrossed on her back, the number was unbelievable—four swords each on her right and her left, plus one more placed upright. Her entire body's silhouette seemed like a joke, even to the point of resembling a Buddha statue to some extent.

But among the many scabbards on her back, only one of them was empty.

The sword kept in it was currently in her hand.

Still dripping with fresh blood at the moment, it was a golden longsword. The grandeur of its design was no less than its own luster with ring-like decorations on the grip while a serpentine pattern was engraved along the blade itself.

Fear glared at the weapon, took a deep breath and yelled:

"I remember you're called Lilyhowell, right...? Why? Why did you kill that guy!?"

"..."

"Answer me! Why did you kill him!? There's clearly no need to do that!"

Lilyhowell took a step towards the garden while looking at Fear.

Her expression seemed to convey "no other way" as well as annoyance, seeming to say that she was answering only because Fear was forcing her to answer. Robotically as though someone had pressed a switch, she spoke listlessly as though without her own will:

"He was simply in the way after his purpose was served."

"...!"

Hearing such a cruel answer, Fear gritted her teeth hard and frowned.

Haruaki also felt intensely conflicted after hearing her words.

Something's wrong. Right, compared to back then, the most different thing about her is—

Her expression.

Her eyes—gloomy, dark, dismal, bitter. Her gaze simply harbored silent darkness, as though looking towards somewhere not present or perhaps nowhere at all. Her expression was virtually constant, with her former awe-inspiring dignity replaced by an air of somewhat intangible nihilism.

Her eyes were not like this in the past. None of this air of intangible nihilism. Back then, Haruaki did not believe she was someone who could kill an ordinary person without blinking an eye.

What had happened to her? What had changed her?

Lilyhowell advanced without hurrying. She stepped into the garden where there were many unconscious humans on the verge of death, all covered in blood. Approaching them step by step—

"Purpose... you say?"

"What exactly is their purpose? Absolutely ridiculous..."

"Yeah, I really don't get what's going on."

Haruaki's group commented while retreating slightly. This was for restraining Fear, who was leaning against Haruaki's shoulder but about to

rush forward any moment, as well as because they noticed that Lilyhowell's steps were not directly straight at them.

"I know this is evil. But I must do it. That is all."

Lilyhowell slowly walked past Haruaki's group while lightly raising the golden longsword in her hand up high. Her gloomy gaze was fixed ahead. Speaking in a tone of indifference, she murmured lifelessly:

"This Wathe, the «Calamitous Sword of Sigarsholm», is a cursed sword that absorbs terror from the surroundings to serve as energy. I gathered these men only for this purpose..."

"What did you say!? So—you meant to incite these ignorant guys and make them flee all over the place!?"

"Indeed. They have worked for me in accordance to the sums I have paid them."

Haruaki was shocked.

Allowing them to attack Nirushaaki's group in total ignorance. Forcing them into a gap between life and death. Some even lost limbs or their lives. However, her goal was simply producing terror in their hearts, all this was for that purpose? Only for the sake of allowing her sword to absorb energy?

Too inhumane. This abhorrent behavior treated humans as nothing more than objects.

A righteous knight would absolutely not do something so demonic.

"You... weren't like this before, right? Why did you become like this?"

"...Why?"

Lilyhowell halted.

Probably not for answering Haruaki's question but simply because the timing coincided. Just at that moment, she happened to arrive at her destination. In other words, she had finally arrived before the group of people who had been watching the latest developments with interest.

"If you ask me why, the answer was long decided ago."

Murmuring quietly as though to herself, Lilyhowell slowly looked up. Gripping the sword tightly in her fist, she inhaled forcefully as though taking a deep breath.

"One, to avenge her. Two, to atone for my sins..."

Only in this instant was definite power infused into her eyes that were filled with hollow darkness. A stern power, gloomy and terrifying, pierced the being in front of her gaze.

"That is all—All this is to kill you! Nirushaaki!"

Upon hearing Lilyhowell—

"The live prey I released... has finally caught up? Returning grown up and matured."

Nirushaaki smiled, overjoyed.

Part 3

Gripping the hatchet hard, Fear watched as Nirushaaki raised her hand lightly.

"A rare specimen of live prey, nourishment for one along the path to become a dragon. In that case, I shall devour her myself. Consider it a show of etiquette towards food."

"—Well then..."

"I shall be her opponent."

Using her raised hand to search through her suit jacket, Nirushaaki took out a certain object from around her back, handing it over to Kotetsu who was waiting on hand next to her. Lilyhowell was apparently biding her time for the chance to strike. Her shoulder shook once at this time but she did not move recklessly. Shifting her feet bit by bit, she slowly closed in.

During this time, Nirushaaki had apparently decided to remove her clothing.

Taking off the heavily wrinkled suit jacket, she casually tossed it onto a nearby chair. Not satisfied with that, she unfastened her skirt and readily allowed the skirt to slide all the way down to her feet. Due to the white shirt she wore as a teacher, still on her upper body, her underwear was not

visible, but still—Too shameless, Fear thought. If possible, she really wanted to redirect Haruaki's gaze while she was leaning against his shoulder, but given the unpredictable situation, it would be too dangerous. Fear could only endure.

Nirushaaki then took off her shoes. Reaching her hand to her hip area underneath the shirt, she removed her black stockings all at once, separating them from her legs. Bare feet. How incomprehensible. Was she trying to seduce them? Clearly the only possible target present whom this could work on was the shameless brat alone.

Then she began to unbutton the shirt remaining on her upper body, going from up to down. First button, second button, third button. After unfastening all the buttons, she casually threw the shirt away without hesitation—Fear originally thought it would be necessary, but in hindsight, there was no need for her to poke out Haruaki's eyes.

Because Nirushaaki was wearing another shirt underneath.

Rather than a western garment with fine needlework, it felt more like a simple tribal outfit. Predominantly white but old and dirty, the shirt looked like it was bursting at the seams in many places. Fear could hear Kuroe whispering blankly nearby:

"What's that? It looks like something that American Indians would wear..."

Many tassels dangled from the shirt's lower fringe which barely reached the thighs in length. Hence, the shirt just barely covered her underwear—But just as Fear was thinking that...

"What? A-Absolutely ridiculous...!"

Kirika groaned. Fear felt the same way. Because Nirushaaki did not stop undressing. Reaching both hands under the hem and using the same motion with which she had removed her stockings earlier—She took off her underwear.

"Not ridiculous at all, because the effects of this one true Ghost Shirt, «Wounded Knee Massacre», are maximized when it has the most contact with bare skin."

Nirushaaki explained politely while tossing her black underwear casually on top of her removed clothing. Finally, she took off her swirl glasses and placed it on the table.

"Nirushaaki-sama, here you go."

In place of the glasses, she retrieved and put on the object she had handed over to Kotetsu for safekeeping just now.

A mask.

It was a mask similar to a shaman's, possessing dual qualities of primitive vivid colors and modest simplicity... For some reason, the mask consisted of more than one face. Apart from the mask covering her face, two similar masks were visible, one on top of each of her ears. The three masks were strung together using something similar to a circlet which she then wore on her head.

"Well then, preparations are complete. What are your plans?"

"Speaking of which, never have I observed thy battle from the sidelines, master. Allow me to be enlightened."

"Then let this humble Kotetsu to serve you, master."

"Yes—Muramasa, you shall confirm by your very own eyes whether I am the wielder worthy of owning you."

Nirushaaki spoke in amusement while Konoha answered with narrowed eyes. What a great big idiot—Fear thought. Damn Cow Tits, why haven't you remembered yet? Your owner, the most suitable owner is—

But Fear's thoughts were interrupted by Kotetsu's sudden disappearance. After blinking, Fear immediately found an unsheathed Japanese sword held in Nirushaaki's right hand. Compared to Cow Tits' true form, it was slightly larger. Furthermore, perhaps due to psychological reasons, the sword somehow seemed more unrefined in appearance. Although slightly inferior to Cow Tits in elegance, conversely, Fear could sense how powerful the sword was.

"Kotetsu huh? The cursed Japanese sword. If you obstruct me, I shall have no choice but to shatter you!"

Lilyhowell had been inching her way to close the distance, but as soon as she saw the weapon in Nirushaaki's hand, she drew out another sword, the one kept in the largest scabbard, carried vertically on her back. This was the greatsword Fear had seen before, the one with the complicated, wavy blade—the «Wathe Breaker».

Holding the golden longsword «Calamitous Sword of Sigarsholm» in her left and the «Wathe Breaker» in her right, Lilyhowell sped up all at once.

In that instant, Fear wondered.

She mulled over how this woman had killed someone, how her demeanor made her almost like a different person, and how she belonged to the Knights' Dominion, a hostile organization. Although there were many things she wanted to say—

"No choice but... to join the fray...!"

No longer leaning against Haruaki's shoulder, she gripped the torture instrument in her hand tightly. Much of her stamina had recovered already. The wounds caused by Cow Tits were also much less painful than earlier.

"H-Hey, Fear!"

"This is a good chance, shameless brat. Cow Tits is currently observing whereas Lilyhowell's target seems to be Nirushaaki. In other words, now is the only chance for defeating Nirushaaki, the culprit responsible for everything, without Cow Tits' interference...!"

"Oh? Excellent. No matter how numerous, I welcome as many opponents in the game as possible."

Sharply noticing the situation over on Fear's side, Nirushaaki made her stance clear. Fear grinned.

"Ha, she says so too. Taking us so lightly... Of course I must join the battle!"

"You might have a point. Then I'll cover you."

"Me too. But Ficchi, don't force yourself too much!"

"Yeah!"

Fear did not wait for Haruaki's response. There was no need either.

Then Fear caught up with Lilyhowell and charged at Nirushaaki.

Wielding Kotetsu in her right, she stood still to wait for the enemies' attacks—Simply standing still? American Indian outfit. Jungle shaman's mask. Japanese sword as a weapon. No matter how you described it,

simply standing still would be an understatement, the sight was totally dissonant.

"En garde! Nirshaaki!"

"Such full vigor!"

Lilyhowell and Nirushaaki finally engaged in frontal battle. Kotetsu and the «Calamitous Sword of Sigarsholm» collided with each other. The ensuing impact caused Nirushaaki's American Indian shirt to flutter. Due to the fact that she was barefooted and wearing nothing except for that garment, not even underwear, there was a sense of wardrobe insecurity disproportionate to the area of clothing.

Making flexible use of the advantages of dual wielding, Lilyhowell immediately made a thrust with the «Wathe Breaker». Unknown whether it was Nirushaaki's own skills or Kotetsu was manipulating her body, she spun her body while swinging her sword, swiftly blocking Lilyhowell's attack.

Fear charged into attack range as well. While shifting positions so that Lilyhowell was not blocking her way, Fear yelled:

"Mechanism No.5 impaling type, upright form: «A Skewer Loved by Vlad Tepes»—Curse Calling!"

Then she launched the execution stake. As though expecting Fear to enter the fray at this time, Nirushaaki dodged the stake with motions that could not be more fluent. Not so naive as to think the match would be decided in a single move, Fear swiftly pulled the stake back.

"Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator»!"

Holding the spiral drill, Fear charged the enemy from an angle different from Lilyhowell, clashing with Kotetsu's heavy and massive blade, but was parried. Suddenly losing the sensation of a resisting weapon, Fear looked up to see Nirushaaki engaging Lilyhowell a second time. Fear could sense that Nirushaaki's skill in movement was extraordinary. Simply the ability to engage two opponents in battle was already a testament to her astonishing capability. However—

"«Tragic Black River»!"

"Mode: «Penetrator Yoshimasa»!"

She was not handling just two opponents. Although Fear could not possibly share flawless and tacit coordination with Lilyhowell, she had already fought alongside Kirika and Kuroe many times by now. Furthermore, these were long distance attacks that annoyed the enemy without hindering her. Although Kotetsu's traits as a sword might hold the advantage against the belt and hair, merely diverting Nirushaaki's attention already changed the situation greatly. Simply stated, the enemy was forced to deal with four autonomous wills from four people. No matter how strong or skilled, she could not possibly last long.

(In the end, your arrogance and carelessness will be your downfall...!)

This could work. Probably soon. As long as this persists, this woman definitely could be defeated—

Believing this firmly, Fear poured her full effort into attacking Nirushaaki.

However—After defeating her... Suppose they succeeded in defeating this woman—

What was going to happen next...?

This question surfaced in Fear's mind but she decided not to ponder the answer for now.

Part 4

Nevertheless, Haruaki was unable to imagine what would come afterwards.

What would happen after Nirushaaki's defeat? What was going to happen?

Was it possible that nothing might occur?

Of course, Haruaki had been racking his brain since the previous night to reach a conclusion. If Konoha had truly lost her memory just as Un Izoey and Mummy Maker had told them, the key to recovering her memory would be the tool that Nirushaaki had used on her—«Bartolomey Oblivion». Perhaps that tool had the functionality of returning memories to normal, or destroying it would cancel the effects?

However, the mask Nirushaaki was currently wearing on her face did not match Un Izoey's description. It was not «Bartolomey Oblivion».

Then where was it—? Haruaki could not help but shudder at the thought.

What if it was no longer around...?

Such as being sent away to somewhere they could not reach. Or perhaps—What if it was already destroyed but Konoha still remained in this current state...

Haruaki trembled. The unease surfacing in a corner of his heart instantly grew vines and flourished, pressing against his chest tightly.

Haruaki decided he must do something at this time, before certain things went past the point of no return. Because they could not possibly be past the point of no return yet. There could not be no return either.

Indeed. Even if Nirushaaki were to be defeated, it did not resolve the any problems. Their goal, what they needed to retrieve, was Konoha. To bring Konoha back.

He wanted to talk to her. Crushed by pressure, panting, Haruaki felt his mind's thoughts dominated by something coercive.

—As long as... As long as I call her a few times, will she recognize me? Will she remember? That's right. Definitely. Definitely—

He moved his legs. Listening to the sounds of weapons clashing from Fear and the others that seemed so far away, he forgot the meaning these sounds represented and simply walked over to where he was supposed to be.

In other words, next to her, the one who had her arms crossed while watching with delight the source of those weapon-clashing noises.

"Kono... ha..."

Haruaki called to her, causing her to throw a sideways glance of puzzlement at him.

Oh no. I can't use this kind of voice to call her. Smile. Smile as usual, as though this is nothing special, I must smile naturally like at home, I must call her again. Then it'll definitely be fine. Because she, because she's—

"—Konoha, let's go home, shall we?"

"Thee again...? Stop addressing me with that bizarre name. Muramasa is mine appellation, brat."

For some reason, Konoha clicked her tongue, frowning and speaking without deigning a further glance. Honestly, for some unknown reason.

"Hahaha. Uh, I already know you're Muramasa."

Just as Haruaki laughed and was about to say something else, he heard an angry roar.

"What the heck!? Hey, damn shameless brat, what are you doing!?"

"I forbid my enemy to look around, distracted!"

"Wah! Kirika, Kuroe, I'm counting on you two!"

"Absolutely ridiculous—that damn Yachi, take this!"

"Haru, wait up!"

Why was everyone so frantic? Clearly this is Konoha in front of me. She can't possibly be anyone else but Konoha.

"Don't you remember, Konoha? Muramasa is the family name while Konoha is your given name, right? That's what was decided in the beginning, right? Actually, you originally said that Muramasa wasn't that great to use as a family name, but I insisted that it's the only name you shouldn't change, so in the end—"

"Sigh... Verily, such cacophony..."

After Haruaki recounted his memories, Konoha sighed deeply and shook her head gently, causing her long hair, no longer in braids, to sway lightly.

Then as though at a loss for words—

As though feeling not a care from the bottom of her heart—

"Enough. Thou wouldst not lose thy life at such a young age, forsooth, if thou wert not so foolish."

She turned her shoulder in an extremely natural movement.

Still with a face of utter boredom...

She stabbed a knifehand strike towards his chest.

(Huh?)

Haruaki thought to himself the instant just before her knife hand reached his chest. In a world of black and white as though time had stopped, he wondered: What's with Konoha? Isn't this very dangerous?

Just at that moment—

He could see black hair entangle Konoha's knife hand with lightning speed. Slightly slowing down the barehanded chop, the hair caused the attack to deviate slightly. Almost at the same time—

"Yachi!"

Haruaki felt an impact. Something struck his shoulder, causing him to stumble. Steadying himself without falling over, Haruaki looked up in puzzlement to see—

Right in front of him, Kirika's chest was being pierced by Konoha's knife hand.

Pierced absolutely beyond a doubt.

"Guh... Ah...!"

"Oh my?"

Konoha instantly sliced through Kuroe's hair that was entangling her arm but she tilted her head slightly as though unaware of having done that.

(Eh...?)

Incomprehensible. How did things come to this? This is clearly Konoha and Class Rep. Why is Class Rep bleeding nonstop from her chest and mouth? Why is Konoha's hand piercing out through Class Rep's back?

Grabbing Konoha's arm with her trembling hand, Kirika looked back at Haruaki over her shoulder.

"Absolutely... ridiculous..."

"Absolutely ridiculous indeed, little lass. Why didst thou act in this manner? 'Tis meaningless, wouldst thou not agree? I do not find him a man worth protecting. Furthermore, he is simply standing there in a daze. I can draw my sword again any time to kill him."

Kirika swallowed the blood surging up in her mouth and looked up forcefully.

"Konoha-kun—No, Muramasa. To think the famed... Muramasa... would kill an unarmed brat who shows absolutely no will to fight...?"

"Oh? Not bad, thy rhetoric. Then what?"

"...I beg you. Don't... kill him..."

"I have no obligation to comply. 'Tis a battlefield. Once on the battlefield, one cannot complain no matter when death arriveth. Because a farmer who had apparently intruded the battlefield by accident could very well be a ninja aiming to target the general's head. To this date, I have slaughtered countless unarmed humans who showed no will to fight. Indeed, I have no obligation to comply with thy request—"

"..."

"Hmm. Already dead."

Konoha withdrew her arm, now vivid red, from Kirika's chest. Losing support, Kirika naturally fell over forward.

Haruaki's back was attacked by a certain feeling, unable to be expressed in words.

With that, Konoha took a step forward. Haruaki was still within her attack range.

Then Konoha lightly lifted up her bloodstained arm. Casually severing the hair that came flying in panic, she exhaled as though sighing.

"Goodness gracious. Indeed, I have no obligation. Bet that as it may, 'tis rare for a lass of her age to be capable of making that sort of request on a dying breath. As a tribute to her integrity, I shall agree to her request this once."

"A-Ah..."

"Hmph, an unsightly showing of trembling legs, moreover. 'Twould be nothing to boast about even if one were to kill you... Nevertheless, thou must be punished for thy cacophony earlier."

Konoha's arm moved. Not a chop—instead, her fist attacked Haruaki's bosom mercilessly. The impact was so great that he almost thought his abdomen was going to burst. Gastric juices instantly flowed up in reverse. Pain, a sense of suffocation. In order to protect the mind from these

sensations that had instantly transcended the limits of toleration, the brain forcibly shut down.

"Haru!"

"Noisy and unsightly. Take him away wherever... If thou valuest thy life, never show thyself before me again, brat."

After hearing these final words—

Haruaki's consciousness slipped into total darkness.

Part 5

While Fear continued to battle Nirushaaki, it was taking her full effort just to observe the situation from the corner of her eye.

"Kirika, Haruaki!"

She knew roughly what had happened. After taking a vicious punch, Haruaki had fainted. Kirika had died. However, this also proved one fact, namely that Cow Tits did not know of that outfit's existence. Fear could see Kuroe mobilizing her hair desperately to move the two unconscious bodies away, transporting them to safety.

"Truth be told, how confident you are to be diverting your attention to the surroundings!" "Indeed!"

Just as Fear suddenly lowered her guard for an instant, a Japanese sword came flying. She blocked with all her strength using «A Hatchet of Lingchi».

(Guh, so strong...)

Pure strength. But Fear also felt that there was more to it, despite being unable to articulate what felt wrong. No, or rather, this inability to articulate the dissonant sense of contradiction was precisely part of why Nirushaaki was so strong?

I must think of a solution—Just as this thought crossed Fear's mind, Lilyhowell suddenly changed her combat rhythm despite fighting vigorously together all this time with tacit cooperation. In other words, had she continued fighting in the same manner, she would have silently allowed Fear to continue the offensive at this moment, however—

Instead, Lilyhowell elbowed Fear in the back, forcing her to fly towards Nirushaaki.

"Uwah!"

Fear lost balance and was only able to deflect Kotetsu using her hatchet's hilt purely by chance. She broke out in cold sweat.

But at the same time, Nirshaaki's left arm went whoosh, striking Fear's chest with the base of her palm. Fear had no idea what kind of martial arts it was but she felt all the air in her lungs forced out in an instant as this powerful impact sent her flying—Nevertheless, from Lilyhowell's perspective, the instant when Fear's body blocked Nirushaaki's view was precisely an excellent opportunity.

"«Calamitous Sword of Sigarsholm»... Terror resides in the tip of this sword!"

Lilyhowell's voice. Instantly, Fear felt something pass through her underarm. Rolling several times on the blood-splattered ground, she ignored the pain in her body and her lungs, looking up forcibly only to see—

"Did it... succeed...?"

The golden longsword's blade had extended quite a few meters, its tip piercing Nirushaaki. The serpentine design on the blade glowed red faintly. As though the snake was crawling forward, the sword had extended with speed faster than the eye could follow clearly. In this regard, it could be considered a long-distance weapon impossible to evade.

Fear was furious that Lilyhowell had used her as bait to create an opening, but if this had defeated the enemy—Just as she thought that, Fear stared wide-eyed in surprise.

"Hmm, do you really believe you can defeat me using such a thing?"

Nirushaaki was calm and composed. Not a single drop of blood bled from her body. As she twisted her body lightly, somehow the calamitous sword's blade slid off the side of her body like a kitchen knife cutting through bean curd.

Guessing that the sword could shrink back, Fear watched as Lilyhowell retracted the blade back to its original length. Pulling back the calamitous sword's tip, Lilyhowell gritted her teeth and groaned.

"«Wounded Knee Massacre»... A Wahe that renders all attacks ineffective. It turns out to be true?"

"What.. the...!?"

Never heard of it. So that was the shirt's curse? That would be—so powerful to the point of being unfair. That woman was very strong to begin with. Armed with that kind of power, how could she be defeated...?

Foreboding thoughts silently retreated to the back of her mind. Immediately next—

"Hey, Kotetsu, allow me to vent my frustrations from being hassled by the bizarre brat and little lass. Time to swap."

"Uh... Nirshaaki-sama...?"

"No matter. Kotetsu, you may take a break. Muramasa, are you thoroughly satisfied?"

"Ha, 'tis sufficient. Master is worthy of controlling me indeed."

Two things happened simultaneous. First of all, Kotetsu jumped up, returning to human form—

"!"

Fear was instantly plunged into confusion, because Kotetsu's body lacked something it was meant to have, yet also possessed something that was not supposed to exist. He—Kotetsu—hastily picked up the clothing he had taken off then covered up his body.

Another thing was that Cow Tits had turned back into her original form.

Namely, a Japanese sword. However, this was not the appearance that Fear had seen many times before. This was not the appearance of a sword sheathed in black metal when wielded in Haruaki's hands.

Instead, the white blade was cold to a terrifying degree.

The blade was as clear as ice, its curved form as transcendental as moonlight.

As a true Japanese sword, as Kotetsu's kindred, she allowed her original appearance to be exposed to the air.

This was her form that was only visible for an instant when performing the «Sword-Kill Counter» technique. She only permitted her true appearance to exist for those instants of time. Nevertheless, the blade currently in view was her true self.

"Tis been so long since I last returned to this form. Allow me to amuse myself as a distraction."

"Lilyhowell Kilmister, I ask you. That move just now cannot be the end, can it?"

"Ugh—!"

Fear was sent flying into the distance by the palm strike earlier. As a result, Nirushaaki proceeded to target Lilyhowell who was nearer. As before, Lilyhowell still continued to dual wield the «Calamitous Sword of Sigarsholm» and the «Wathe Breaker» together. A Wathe with a weapon for breaking Wathes. Truly a paradoxical case of dual wielding.

"Oh, so thou art able to control the range of attack freely. Verily, a special toy. However—"

Dodging the tip of the freely extending calamitous sword, Muramasa switched from defense to offense. However, Lilyhowell also anticipated the counterattack, or perhaps, she had deliberately allowed the opponent to attack her. Lilyhowell instantly used her other sword to intercept.

That's right, she has that thing—Fear thought.

Namely, the «Wathe Breaker» on her right. Using this to counterattack, the enemy's weapon could be broken.

(No, wait a sec. This is very bad, right? At this rate—)

Fear felt her heart beat intensely, but her worries turned out to be unfounded. Even from a bystander's perspective, Lilyhowell's counterattack was flawless. Fear could even see an illusion as though the complicated shape of Lilyhowell's blade had broken the opponent's weapon. However—

The opposite happened in reality.

"The other sword is merely ugly and so boring too—I shall show thee my power. Ha, please do not make a laughable display of third-rate swords in front of one so beautiful as I!"

The blade's brilliance flashed powerfully as it crossed with Lilyhowell's «Wathe Breaker».

Instantly, a number of lines seemed to appear on the surface of the twisted blade's complicated form, then—

As though robbed of its title, the «Wathe Breaker»'s blade shattered and scattered.

"Guh... Ohhhh!"

At the same time, blood gushed from Lilyhowell's shoulder. The aftershock of Muramasa's swing had gone as far as to injure Lilyhowell's body. The bleeding was not minor—but in spite of that, she still faced forward resiliently.

"Oh?" The Japanese sword could be heard exclaiming, slightly impressed.

"Tis impressive thy arm was not chopped off. Despite toys for weapons, thou art evidently an accomplished swordsman."

"This person is also skilled in counterattacks. With similar timing, she swung the greatsword knowing the significance that counterattacking represented. Precisely because of that, she was able to evade a critical wound, just barely."

Fear witnessed it again. After turning into a sword, there was still no change. That girl was still unafraid of fresh blood, hesitating not the slightest to kill the enemy. That girl had already turned into this kind of existence...!

"This is bad. Looks like Haru and Kiririn won't be waking up any time soon! Ficchi, let's retreat for now!"

Taking care of Haruaki and Kirika, Kuroe called out urgently to Fear.

Looking at the Japanese sword in Nirushaaki's hand again, Fear gritted her teeth hard.

She really wanted to roar angrily at those people, but did not know what to say.

—What could she say? What could she say to those people?

From her own perspective, what kind of existence was that Japanese sword? Fear pondered but could not even answer this question. An enemy? A friend? Right now? What about in the past?

"Ficchi!"

"...Okay!"

In any case, Haruaki and Kirika could not be left alone. Also, Fear was very worried about the ordinary people who were left on the scene, injured (and almost all of them unconscious). It was not difficult to imagine what fate lay ahead of them if they were left here. All she could do right now was follow Kuroe's directions, retreating for now then regrouping.

"Kuroe, this might be hard... But those guys collapsed here... As long as they're still alive, can you move them all out together?"

"...If I go all out, I can probably manage, barely."

"I'm counting on you."

Standing up, Fear retreated while paying attention to Nirushaaki and the others' movements.

Ignoring the blood drenched shoulder, Lilyhowell forced her arm to turn, drawing another sword from a scabbard behind her to replace the «Wathe Breaker». A western rapier with a needle-like blade.

"McLachlan's Adultery Penetrator, «Stick Me Please»..."

"Oh? What curse does this sword have?"

"You shall know once you die from being stabbed!"

The needle-like blade's tip was barbed with a design similar to the «Flower Sword Verazella». The rapier stabbed into Nirushaaki's chest, but the result was the same as before. Direct penetration. Still, Nirushaaki did not die.

"To display such recklessness even after witnessing this «Wounded Knee Massacre»'s power, you must have believed in your chances of victory. Judging from the shape—That sword probably carries the kind of curse along the lines of 'impossible to pull out once stabbed'?"

"Guh..."

"When curses contradict each other, naturally, the stronger curse wins."

Nirushaaki simply moved her body to the side and the rapier slid out from her flank. "Another sword with such a frail form." The Japanese sword flashed again, easily destroying the rapier.

Lilyhowell groaned while retreating. Nirushaaki stroked the aged shirt while she spoke:

"This belonged to an American Indian, the only man who survived a massacre, shielded by his companions. Claiming 'the ability to resist the white man's bullets,' this type of clothing, ghost shirts, was quite popular among the American Indians. Fictional to begin with, but thanks to the lies of the man who survived by luck, this shirt became the only 'genuine article' capable of manifesting the claimed effects. Then it was cursed by the resentment of those who had died in the massacre, acquiring its taboo abilities at the same time. Hence, this is the one true Ghost Shirt, «Wounded Knee Massacre». Despite this tool's relatively short history, surpassing its curse is no easy task."

"...One, I am injured. Two, curse is already confirmed. That is all, I conclude... Now is not the time yet..."

In a voice that sounded as painful as vomiting blood, Lilyhowell muttered while gritting her teeth.

Using those eyes that were still guided by dark willpower, she glared ahead.

She was still exuding an ice-cold aura of vengeance.

Lilyhowell proceeded to retreat, pulling away from Nirushaaki. Stated bluntly, she was preparing to flee. Just like Fear and the others.

Fear understood. Perhaps Lilyhowell was driven insane by the desire for vengeance, but she was not mad to the point of forgetting her objective. She still had an objective that she must achieve at all costs, determined to do so by any means necessary—She was simply harboring resolve to the point of near insanity.

Showing no intention of chasing after Lilyhowell who was about to escape, Nirushaaki spoke without hurry:

"Non-foolish avengers are very strong, nourishment for one to reach the side of the dragon... As I have said, we must currently wait here in the

meantime. Consequently, we shall neither run nor hide. Come challenge us all you want."

Fear could see her masked head turn lightly. It seemed like these words were not only meant for Lilyhowell to hear but Fear's group as well.

However, by this time, Fear already had her back towards Nirushaaki's faction completely, sprinting at full speed. There were no signs of pursuit. She could see Kuroe ahead, moving her tiny legs desperately, meanwhile using her hair to support Haruaki, Kirika and roughly ten other people. Although Fear had no idea what happened to Lilyhowell, she was pretty sure the knight would escape successfully.

(Come challenge you all we want...?)

Fear gnashed her teeth violently. Without needing Nirushaaki to say so, Fear had no intention of letting things end here. Her group was definitely going to make another visit.

However—after visiting, what were they going to do?

When the time came, for what purpose were they going to visit this place?

Currently, Fear had no idea at all.

Chapter 3 - The Darkness Known as the Knight; Its Significance / "The blade - It's two-faced."

Part 1

Why was she here? She thought blankly to herself.

In front of her was a garden. The leaves of giant old trees, clothing hanging on laundry poles, weeds growing unchecked, everything was swaying under the light breeze. In a corner was a small storehouse with earthen walls, but apart from that, the garden was empty. No ponds with carp, nor stepping stones, nor stone lanterns, nor wash basins. Hence, the space was inexplicably wide open, to an excessive degree. Thinking to herself, she decided it would be best if the storehouse were to be demolished so that a detached accessory dwelling could be built.

The seat beneath her bottom was a cushion, while under it lay the wooden floorboards of the veranda. Next to the cushion was a cup of tea. Behind her was the unoccupied living room where inconceivable tools known as the 'television' and the 'radio' were kept inside. Times have truly changed—She thought to herself.

Yes—Indeed.

Why was she here?

"Here" could be interpreted as not only "this house" but also "this era."

An anachronistic sword, why was it here in this kind of place? She already knew a long time ago. Wars could no longer take place again. At least, there was no longer the type of battle where generals and soldiers would cross swords with one another on the ground.

Then why exist? With her purpose forsaken, why exist?

This peaceful country did not need weapons. This peaceful era did not need weapons. For self-defense, a kitchen knife would be sufficient. So long as the enemy was not wielding a sword, there was no need for her to be swung...

"So boring..."

She casually took a sip of tea. Staring out into the unchanging garden, she murmured to herself.

This was not only the present circumstances but also the case all along.

Feeling tired of everything, that was why she had come to this home.

To be honest, she did not care about her curse at all. After all, curses were curses, nothing more than that, hence she believed in simply going with the flow. For her personally, this was on the same level as pondering the meaning of her existence and mulling over her past or present.

In any case, she wanted change. Even if had nothing to do with lifting the curse, it did not matter. Indeed, if there existed some other way of killing time at hand, she would not mind trying it out—

At this moment, a child's head emerged in the garden she was watching. Actually, it was just a head that had popped up from below her field of view.

He was probably planning on hiding under the veranda then secretly approaching to give her a fright, but of course, she had sensed his presence a long time ago. When she stared back intently at him without any reaction at all, he pouted slightly as though going "tsk~" But immediately, he recovered his vigor while maintaining his posture with his upper body leaning over the veranda.

"Hey hey, you're trying to remove what's called a curse, right? Do your best. Is there anything I can help?"

Then he said that to her. Although he was quite nervous on their first encounter, she had started living here a few days already and this child—Haruaki—had gotten quite used to her presence. He had started to attempt conversations with her in this familiar tone of voice. Putting aside the fact whether she was pleased with this or not.

"Hmph, I care not either way. 'Tis not decided whether I shall lift my curse or not."

"Eh~? Then why did you come here?"

"Because Honatsu pestered me for ages, claiming he would brew good tea for me to savor, I finally relented, unable to bear the nuisance. Moreover, that fellow finally went as far as to kneel and beg... Ha, fallen in love with me, he must have."

She deliberately ended with a joke. "Really~?" asked Haruaki with his head tilted. It was true, up until the part about kneeling.

"Certainly. Listen carefully, perhaps thou cannot understand yet, but all men love large busts. Thy mother—Honatsu's wife—surely must be the same."

Haruaki tilted his head again and answered: "Really~? I don't quite remember." According to Honatsu, his wife had divorced him immediately after giving birth to Haruaki. The veracity of Honatsu's words was uncertain, but assuming it were true, then indeed, Haruaki would not remember his mother's face or figure.

"When thou growest older, thou shalt pounce upon my bosom obsessively too. Or perhaps thou wishest to try now?"

"N-No, it's okay..."

Like an adult, he was shy. Seeing that, she grinned and placed her teacup on the side.

"In any case—concerned I am not regarding the curse. 'Twould be too bothersome to do something expressly for lifting the curse. Let nature taketh its course."

"But Dad said it's better to have curses lifted."

"What are curses, brat, dost thou know...?"

She grinned on purpose as she scrutinized Haruaki's face. An excellent opportunity, she thought.

"My curse—A desire to see fresh blood. It applieth to both mine owner and myself alike. Whether a noble-minded saint or gentlemen, no one can escape this impulse once they pick me up. Told you not hath Honatsu? Prior to coming to this place, I used to reside at a certain wealthy household."

"Wealthy household?"

"A rich man's home, in other words. The residence was several times bigger than this house. Expensive vases and hanging scrolls decorated the entire place—However, by the time I awakened, virtually all decorations were stained by fresh blood. Presumably because a long time had passed since I was last unsheathed, the curse had accumulated heavily."

"..."

"Wife, daughter, son, parents, servants, as well as a delivery man who visited by chance. A massacre. By the time the impulse subsided, probably regained his sanity suddenly my wielder did. Just as I was about to speak to that long-awaited owner, he had already raised me up and pierced his own throat. Then happened many things. Pondering what to do I was, when fellows called the police took me away and locked me into a dark space. Then Honatsu appeared—Yes, I need not recount the rest henceforth."

The kneeling affair was mentioned already. At the time, she was thinking, what a bizarre man.

"Understand, dost thou? This is myself, my curse. Murdering upon awakening, slumbering once weary, then awakening once more to murder. 'Tis what I have done repeatedly ever since the days of the Warring States..."

She narrowed her eyes and lowered her voice, releasing a heavy, murderous atmosphere—Thus she spoke. A cowardly human, clinging greedily to life, would probably go incontinent directly with this.

She thought: he would best go incontinent, best feel afraid. From her perspective, this boy was merely a bothersome little animal that kept loitering in her sight. However—

"I know, Dad told me before. Besides, I've seen many things already by now."

In front of the wild beast, that little animal smiled innocently instead.

Sure enough. It was the same as when she had threatened him the first time. Why—Why was he not afraid?

"Also, I've heard that I possess the kind of constitution that neutralizes the effects of curses through 'owning' the object. So you don't have to worry."

Honatsu had told her before. Even now, she was still partially unconvinced, but hearing Haruaki declare so firmly, perhaps it might be true after all.

Compared to this matter... Compared to this sort of matter—

She really doubted that this brat before her truly understood what curses were exactly. Neither did he comprehend how terrifying, shocking, ugly curses were. Or their dangers.

But at least right now, her current self here was able to kill humans with her bare hands, rather than a vague and intangible existence like a curse. A threat in reality. He ought to understand this point. But why was he not afraid? Why was he still able to smile?

This laid back child called Yachi Haruaki—What was going on?

She was struck by an inexplicable feeling. This feeling resembled unease, fear as well as agitation.

"Oh right, I know your name is Muramasa, but it'll be troublesome later if that's the whole thing. It sounds like a family name so just use it as a family name, I guess. Then you need to think of a given name. Have you thought of one? If not, let's think of one together. Yeah~ What kind of name would be nice...?"

While she was silent, Haruaki started the next conversation on his own, muttering by himself. Names were of no consequence at all.

Suddenly, a question entered her mind. Not about him but herself.

Currently, she was regarding this boy as her temporary owner, because Honatsu had hassled her nonstop, saying that this would prevent her curse from activating, which was why she reluctantly did as suggested. She still felt uninterested in this proposal. Something she found suspicious also remained deep-rooted in the bottom of her heart.

Supposing what the father and the son said were true. Her curse was "a desire to see fresh blood." If Haruaki being her owner could neutralize the curse's effects, then Haruaki would not be tormented by that desire.

However—However...

This desire she harbored of "wanting to see fresh blood," where exactly did it go?

In a certain sense, this was also a kind of curse. A trait branded upon her body.

While being owned by the boy for which the curse would not activate, what might be the end result? Was her own desire erased together as well? Or was it—

"What kind of name do you like~? A classy one? Or a cool one? Hey, let's think together. You don't want a weird name, right?"

"...I care not either way..."

Repeating the words she had said who knew how many times today, she deliberately forgot all the thoughts in her mind.

A quiet garden. A light breeze caressing the veranda. A boy's voice, noisy but not to the point of ear-piercing. As long as she refrained from listening to the content, it sounded just like wind chimes.

Breathing out, she picked up the teacup by her side and brought it to her lips. Although it was thoroughly lukewarm, perhaps it suited the mild scenery currently before her eyes.

No helping it. Mild things were here to stay.

Hence, staying longer in this country was probably fine—She experienced a feeling akin to resignation surging ambiguously in her heart. What infuriated her was that the end result turned out exactly the same as Honatsu's invitation.

While sipping tea, she murmured softly:

"...Drinking cheap tea hither to the point of addiction, forsooth."

Part 2

"Haruaki!"

"Yachi, are you alright?"

"Haru, do you feel unwell anywhere?"

"Hmm... Huh...?"

Haruaki suddenly sat up to find himself in his own room. Next to the futon was Fear, Kirika and Kuroe, all watching him with worried faces. For an instant, he had no idea what was going on.

"Uh, why is everyone... What happened to me...?"

"You... don't remember?"

Fear's voice sounded quite worried. What happened? —Haruaki spun his drowsy mind at full speed.

"...Oh."

Finally, he remembered. He remembered everything that had happened so far.

Then he laughed out loud.

"Oh yeah...? Haha. Oh dear, seriously, what's up with Konoha? She punched me. How terrible and it was painful. Hahaha—Urgh!?"

Haruaki's breathing choked for a second. Fear first made an expression of surprise then her face darkened as she grabbed Haruaki's collar and pulled him towards her. Close enough for them to feel each other's breathing, she said:

"—Shameless brat, I understand how you feel, but come on, face reality."

Fear's eyes contained seriousness, anger, unease and fright. At the same time, she was desperately suppressing these emotions.

With Fear still grabbing his collar, Haruaki heard an inhaling sound and turned to look at the source. Kirika had a solemn expression—if anything, her face was livid with fright—and she said to him:

"Yachi, Fear-kun and Kuroe-kun have already told me what happened after I died. I'll be straight with you... You're only alive purely by chance. There is no possibility apart from that. Konoha is not infiltrating the enemy camp by feigning memory loss out of certain considerations. That is also not the reason why she used a fist against you instead of a knifehand strike."

On top of Kirika's thighs while she was sitting formally in seiza, her fists could be seen clenching tightly.

"With equal probability as getting punched, she really could have chopped you to death on the spot. Whether she was willing to listen to my plea, from her perspective, it really was nothing more than the difference between stepping forward with her right foot or her left foot first. Simply a whim, a moment's fancy, nothing more than pure chance..."

Kirika also drew her face up close to Haruaki. Something shiny could be seen faintly in the corners of her eyes.

Haruaki was thunderstruck. The world shook for a while as the dislocations in his sense of reality were realigned.

The current situation, as well as his own situation.

In a real sense, he finally understood.

"Ficchi and Kiririn are right. I understand you're very shocked, but we can't move forward unless you face reality as it is. If you die while day dreaming... It'd be throwing good money after the bad."

Haruaki slowly turned his head and looked at the three girls' faces, then exhaled forcefully.

"You're right. I'm sorry—and thank you all. Fear, Class Rep, Kuroe."

He bowed his head, conveying a will of "I'm okay now." The three girls exuded relief.

Making a wry smile completely different from the smile of escapism just now, Haruaki patted Fear's arm since she was still grabbing his collar.

Fear instantly went "muu" and pouted.

"Hmph!"

Then as though hiding her embarrassment, she pushed Haruaki towards his futon.

—It was already evening.

Holding a pack of rice crackers in one hand, Fear sat down on the veranda. Her reason for choosing the veranda was, of course, because Haruaki was already sitting there spacing out after waking up.

While chewing the first rice cracker she had taken out, she glanced sideways at Haruaki. Taking out a second rice cracker, she stood it upright.

"Want one? If it's just one, it's not like I can't share with you."

"The sun must be rising from the west. But I'll have to pass this time. Because my stomach is still throbbing with pain."

Haruaki answered while touching his belly. "Really?" Fear stuffed the second piece into her mouth. So tasty.

"Don't eat too much, it's almost time for dinner."

"I didn't eat lunch today so I'll have to compensate with rice crackers."

Considering their injuries, they would best stay still for today—Both Haruaki and Fear had received such orders. Hence, Kirika and Kuroe were currently preparing dinner in the kitchen.

They were currently alone together.

She was sitting on the same veranda as him, looking at the same garden as him, eating rice crackers.

The warmth of Haruaki beside her almost seemed to be transmitted through the veranda's floor. She could already admit—it felt very comfortable. Staying by Haruaki's side, silent like this, it felt inexplicably comfortable. Very blissful. She wanted this to continue forever.

(But...)

Something was not quite the same.

Right now, only right now, she could not help but think this. Her heart was restless and ill at ease. A sense of anxiety was boycotting the blissful feeling from another side. Was it really okay for her to accept this kind of situation gladly? —This kind of guilty feeling.

Tsk! Fear mentally clicked her tongue. Seriously, what a dilemma.

Whether present or absent, that woman was always such an eyesore—

"Oh right, what happened to the people Lilyhowell gathered?"

"...I asked Kuroe to move out all the ones who could be moved. After first aid treatment, we left them at a safe place then called an ambulance. I don't know anything after that."

"I see."

Once again, the focus of her thoughts shifted over from this topic to the question she had been pondering earlier. What exactly should they do? What should they do from here on?

Time continued to flow away silently. Only the crisp sound of chewing rice crackers was coming from her own mouth. She had already stopped counting how many she had eaten. Haruaki had stopped reminding her not to eat too much.

Just at this time, a phone's ringtone was heard. Haruaki took out his cellphone from his pocket.

"It's Un Izoey."

"Pick it up, pick it up. I want to listen too."

The two of them brought their heads together next to the flip phone. As a result, Fear's cheek was pressed against Haruaki's hand that was holding the phone. She felt a commotion in her heart but deliberately avoided thinking about it. Right now, the conversation was more important.

"Hello? What's up? Did you receive any new information?"

'—My reply: a report on the contrary.'

Fear could feel Haruaki's fingers quietly relaxing his grip on the phone.

"Then... What's the matter? Say, do you know what happened today?"

'My reply: yes. The basic situation is already known. This phone call's intent: simply an apology.'

"Apology? What do you mean by that, country girl? Be more clear."

Un Izoey seemed puzzled to hear Fear's voice but immediately steadied her mind and answered:

'About Muramasa Konoha's memory, there was one part I deliberately withheld. Not "losing memory" but phenomenon of "turning into her past self," I explain with this kind of explanation.'

"What's the difference?"

'In other words, impossible to recover. From the start, she does not possess the memories that are supposed to be retrieved. She did not forget. The current her is the person who never made memories together with you. Hence my statement... If it's simply talking to her, telling her old memories, or giving stimulation, these kinds of "usual methods," I can say with certainty that the probability of her regaining her memory approaches zero.'

"...That does seem to be the case, as much as I don't want to believe it."

Haruaki muttered quietly, mixed with sighs.

'Before your first contact with her, I was unable to explain. Umm... Because I was thinking this information might be wrong.'

"It's okay, you're just worrying about us. Also... I think we would find it hard to believe too unless we actually met her for real like that."

"But then what should we do? It's not like we can just leave her like that."

Fear recalled how Konoha had gone as far as to attack amateurs mercilessly. She looked very happy yet a little bored at the same time. In any case, she was not the Konoha whom Fear knew.

"Hmph, that girl who used to vomit at the sight of blood... is more... like her..."

"...Fear is right. So, Un Izoey, can you listen to my opinion?"

'My answer: yes.'

"Anyway, Konoha is very dangerous the way she is right now. So even if it's slightly coercive, I think we've no choice but to capture her by force. Then the problem is what comes after her capture. The mask the enemy used on Konoha—It's called «Bartolomey Oblivion», right? Does that tool have a reset function? If we can get our hands on that tool, maybe..."

'To be honest, that is unknown. I think further investigation is needed, but that used to belong to the Knights' Dominion. Information too little, uncertain if answer can be obtained, I answer with this kind of answer.'

What an honest girl. Haruaki first closed his eyes, somewhat disappointed, then nodded lightly and said:

"—That's true, there will be things that even your side doesn't know. No matter what, we'll just have to assume there's a reset function for now and take action with that goal in mind..."

"Then to get that tool, I guess we have to defeat Nirushaaki. The problem is how to defeat her."

Fear narrowed her eyes and recalled that woman's appearance. An American Indian style shirt. Complete immunity to attacks. How could she be defeated? She also had two Japanese swords in her possession. Two demon blades with curses powerful enough for them to take human form. Furthermore—

"She's wearing that weird mask. What is it?"

'My answer: apology that this is unknown too. To begin with, Nirushaaki is an elusive being, just like her title the «Battle Demon». I investigated the Lab Chief's Nation's materials but still haven't found any information. I plan to continue investigating.'

Plan to continue. These words reminded Fear of something important.

"Oh right... You need to be quick. You can't keep dallying because we've got a time limit."

Haruaki's face tensed and looked sideways at Fear.

"They said that... The reason why they're staying there is because they summoned the Commander and are waiting for his arrival. I think they said it'll take a week roughly."

"I'm not interested in competitions of strength but seeing as he's the Commander, that guy must be the strongest of the Draconians, naturally. When Nirushaaki fights that guy, there's no guarantee that her weapons will survive intact. It won't be surprising even if they get broken during the fight."

Fear spoke inauspiciously without mincing her words. Or one could call it considering the worst possibility.

'My understanding: a solution must be found within a week, in other words, I give this kind of understanding.'

"—I'll think again carefully, what can be done during this time. I'm willing to do anything. Anything! If you come up with a plan, tell me."

Haruaki's tone of voice was resolute and emotional unlike his usual self. Fear found this new side quite curious but also felt unsettled. Then Haruaki narrowed his eyes as though thinking about something while muttering into the telephone receiver.

"Nirushaaki's faction is really dangerous. It'd be too dangerous to ask Sovereignty and Chihaya for help since they're not used to fighting. So, you... can't fight alongside us, right?"

After a pause, Un Izoey answered in a forced voice:

'My apology: I assert this is impossible. This time we can only provide information.'

"I see."

He was simply asking, hence Haruaki was not too disappointed and nodded readily.

"Then please continue to gather information. Also, say hi to Amanda for us."

'Yes. She is next to me. She also asks me to say hi to you—What's the matter? I ask this kind of question.'

"What's the matter?"

'She pulled my skirt. Want me to look at that? That is... Hmm... I see.'

What happened? Fear and Haruaki exchanged looks, but that was not going to produce an answer.

"By the way, I still haven't asked. Where are you two right now?"

'My answer: we are currently at a location on surveillance, in other words the other person related to this incident, the abandoned building where Lilyhowell Kilmister is hiding. I explain this kind of explanation.'

"What?"

Next, she returned to her usual tone of calmness and said something that Haruaki and Fear could not possibly listen calmly to:

'Another thing came up that should be reported to you. Lilyhowell Kilmister has kidnapped unrelated normal couple, currently taking them into abandoned building... What are your plans?'

Part 3

She was no longer a noble knight. Haruaki understood this clearly since a while ago. Otherwise, she could not possibly have done what she did this morning—namely, getting unrelated humans involved.

This time, she was involving ordinary people again. Perhaps someone might be sacrificed. Once he learned of it, Haruaki could not refrain from intervening.

Besides, there was the matter that Un Izoey had discussed just now, about «Bartolomey Oblivion» that could possibly return Konoha to her original

state. Since it used to belong to the Knights' Dominion, Lilyhowell should understand that mask to a certain level. As soon as it occurred to them that she might be able to provide other useful information, so long as it is information that could be asked, they wanted to find out all of it.

Towards Lilyhowell's hiding place whose location was revealed by Un Izoey, in other words, an abandoned hotel in the countryside, Haruaki's group sprinted, sprinted, sprinted nonstop—

Haruaki felt anxious.

(What's this feeling...?)

He had a kind of feeling that this must be done.

However, he did not know why he thought that. There was only an impulse driving him nonstop.

Sprinting madly like this was for the sake of stopping Lilyhowell's acts of cruelty and in order to obtain information related to «Bartolomey Oblivion».

But ruling these two motivations aside, he still wanted to meet Lilyhowell—There was this kind of impulse.

While experiencing this impulse, Haruaki silently ran together with Fear and the others.

Towards a deserted corner in the countryside, far away from the town.

Towards ruins that gradually came into view as a dark shadow, standing upright and unmoving.

Part 4

She was just doing what she ought to do. Nothing more.

Maintaining dark and calm emotions, Lilyhowell Kilmister looked down at the two guests.

Probably a party hall in the past, this wide open space was nothing more than a concrete floor now. Near the center, she had sat down the two guests then tied them to their chairs. The chairs were placed facing each other, separated by roughly a meter's distance. Due to the hall's spaciousness, these conditions probably made them feel even more uncomfortable.

"H-H-H-H-Help... Help! I beg you, I beg you, p-please don't... kill us!"

"Umm, if it's money... I'll pay... so please... just her, could you... umm...!"

Of course, allowing the chairs to face each other was for letting the two of them see each other, thereby provoking fearful feelings efficiently. Just the sight of each other in restraints was already making the couple shuddering all over in fright.

"One, there are no drawbacks to storing energy. Two, multiple options must be available at all times. That is all. Although it is ineffective in a frontal attack—the calamitous sword's power must be maintained..."

She stared silently at the the couple. The two of them were simply feeling terrified of this situation. Soon they were going to get used to it. She must do something new. What should she do—?

In any case, she stepped forward.

Without saying a word, she punched the man's face. Two punches, three punches, four punches. The wound inflicted on her shoulder by Muramasa was still hurting, but she had already performed first aid treatment. Ignoring it, she punched a fifth and sixth time.

"Guh! Gah... Ahhh... S-Stop it, I beg you... Have mercy on me, stop it!"

"Kyahhhh! This is terrible... Don't, stop... Stop it now!"

The man's nose kept bleeding nonstop. Her fist became soiled with fresh blood. Time to swap—Lilyhowell approached the woman this time, bringing her fist towards her—

"Don't... Don't... Don't!"

"Lick it."

She did not hit women. Women were very frail. If assaulted, they would die very quickly. Although honestly speaking, Lilyhowell did not care at all, she still decided it would be better to draw out the woman's terror as much as possible before killing her.

Probably afraid of getting punched, the woman stuck out her trembling tongue and slurped as she licked the blood from her beloved boyfriend's nose. Whether it was because she felt unwell or because the blood itself was nauseating, the woman vomited violently. But Lilyhowell did not allow

her to stop. Still emotionally calm, she tapped the woman's lower jaw with her fist, urging the woman to continue. The red tongue started moving again. A seductive tongue. A tongue that probably exchanged saliva between lovers on a regular basis.

Right, there was that method too.

Taking her saliva-moistened fist away from the woman's lips, Lilyhowell moved towards her chest instead and forcefully tore up her clothing.

"Eeek!"

Since even her underwear was torn, a white breast was exposed. Sexual arousal was generated instinctively. However, Lilyhowell suppressed desire using rationality. This was not simply sexual assault. Gripping forcefully, she groped, squeezed the tip, toying with it.

"Eeek... Ah, it hurts, stop it... What... are you doing...!?"

"I seem to be a lesbian."

The color of terror surfaced in the woman's eyes that were inexorably troubled to begin with. Now this was more like it. Lilyhowell allowed her fingers to slide towards the thigh underneath the skirt while moving upwards in search of the source, saying at the same time:

"Understood? That is why I could continue playing with you. I could play with you tirelessly. That said, just using fingers alone is probably not going to satisfy me. But I cannot bring myself to use a sword's hilt—Well then, is there a bottle somewhere nearby...?"

As Lilyhowell looked around as though in search of something, the woman probably figured out what she meant, twisting her body and starting to struggle.

"No, no, no no no! Stop it, please stop, I'm begging you—! I'll do anything, anything you want! Eeek, kyah, no, eeeeeeeeek!"

The woman was so afraid that she seemed like she was about to get hyperventilation syndrome. Hoping for a chain reaction, Lilyhowell looked behind her—However, the man was limp and not moving, his swollen eyelids shut. Too much bleeding? Truly what a shame.

Lilyhowell left the woman. The tearful woman moaned as though feeling relieved. But it was too soon to relax. Next, Lilyhowell intended to use even more repulsive methods to gather terror.

Lilyhowell gripped the hilt of one of the swords sheathed on her back. This hilt was covered with black stains. After she drew the sword—

"..."

The sword was instantly enveloped in fire. Not just the blade but also the hilt, the entire sword was on fire. Naturally, the palm of Lilyhowell's hand, gripping the sword, was also burning. The unusual stench of scorched flesh. She deliberately ignored the pain.

"W-What? What's that..."

"This sword is named «ESP» for Endlion Self Punishment. However, the name is probably meaningless to you. What you want to know is probably how it is used. Of course, this is what I am going to do."

Lilyhowell pressed the back of the flaming red-hot blade against the neck of the limp and unmoving man.

"Eeeeeek! Stop it, hurry and stop——!"

"Kyah... Ahhh... Ahhhhhhhh!"

"—He woke up."

Lilyhowell returned «ESP» to its scabbard. The flames disappeared. Looking at the couple, she found them gazing back at her with fearful eyes that conveyed a different meaning from before and dramatically more confused. They looked like they were watching an inexplicable monster.

Perfect, she thought. People who witnessed curses were all supposed to show these kinds of eyes.

However, the terror of curses had not ended yet. She must make them even more, much more terrified. Lilyhowell drew another sword from her back, one that had a slightly curved blade with a fair amount of thickness.

"This is the slaughtering blade «My Bloody Valentine». Its curse compels the user to chop flesh. The more it chops, the sharper the blade becomes. Although the flesh of livestock is better than nothing, of course, the best effect still comes from..."

She stopped mid-sentence in a profound manner, taking a step towards the couple.

"N-No way... Don't..."

"H-Help, I beg you, I beg you... Please, you must spare me, I beg you...!"

Who should she select? She originally wanted to start by chopping fingers off, but the woman was already incontinent from fright. Scaring her any further and her heart might stop beating. Then select the man first. He looked relatively more energetic. He also started begging for his life before the woman, how disagreeable. Then it was decided.

Having made her decision, Lilyhowell raised the slaughtering blade high—"!"

Then she swiftly turned around with a flash of the blade.

The dull sound of steel clashing resounded all around. Given that heavy and solid sensation, it was the feeling generated from the violent collision between her blade and the torture wheel flying from behind. A chain of cubes connected to the wheel—Ahead was the girl and her group, glaring at Lilyhowell.

Still calm and composed, Lilyhowell sighed softly.

"How troubling. These people are probably not afraid of curses."

Part 5

After quietly murmuring "how troubling" in nonchalance as though encountering rain upon exiting a convenience store, Lilyhowell slightly lowered her still-gloomy gaze and said:

"How did you know of this place—No, I can guess. It must be the Lab Chief's Nation."

"How do you know?"

"In order to find out Nirushaaki's location, I made a deal with them and sold out confidential information from the Knights' Dominion. I should have expected that from that point onwards, they would have complete knowledge of my movements."

"You sold out the Dominion's information...?"

Haruaki frowned. That kind of thing was possible? Of course not. Then the woman before his eyes here—

"—Right now, I am not taking action as a member of the Knights' Dominion. My identity is simply Lilyhowell Kilmister. Well, they might be sending pursuers after me. After all, my methods were a little forceful... when I took these swords out from the Dominion's weapons vault..."

"I don't care about what's going on inside the Knights' Dominion. Anyway, we can't allow your cruel acts to continue—Kuroe!"

"Yes yes~"

Kuroe silently extended her hair and pulled the couple over along with the chairs they were tied to. Haruaki was expecting Lilyhowell to stop them, but she simply stood with her heavy cleaver of a sword without moving from her position.

"Eek... Eek... Eeeeeek!"

"Ahhhhhhh!"

"Woah~ Keep still, you guys. But I don't think you'll listen even if I say that. You might get traumatized if you see more weird things, so I'd be happy if you could sleep for a while. Mode: «Sleeping Sadayoshi»!"

Probably strangled by their necks. the couple closed their eyes together and stopped moving. Although this treatment was a little forceful, there was no luxury of being considerate now. Haruaki could only hope for their forgiveness and understanding.

"What kind of knight are you? Your recent behavior is atrocious. Anyway, we'll capture you first!"

"This would—trouble me greatly."

"Like anyone cares about you! Mechanism No.22 bludgeoning type, spike-ball form: «Morgenstern»!"

Fear charged forward with the spiked metal club in hand.

"I'll cover you. She should be easier to deal with than a Japanese sword!"

Kirika extended the cursed belt. Seeing that, Lilyhowell said:

"I have no wish of exhausting «Sigarsholm»'s power. Against opponents like you, I shall use this slaughtering blade «My Bloody Valentine»—plus «ESP» along for the ride!"

Apart from the heavy blade that was in her hand to begin with, she also drew out a burning sword from her back. Her palm also seemed to be burning, but she only raised an eyebrow. She was probably suppressing the pain through sheer willpower.

"What...!?"

Kirika groaned. The extended «Tragic Black River» had merely brushed past «ESP»'s blade but the belt's tip was already charred, resulting in the stench of burnt leather. Kirika frantically slapped «Tragic» against the ground, extinguishing the fire that was spreading upwards along the belt. Behind her, Kuroe made a "Oh crap! Too scary!" look after confirming the unconscious couple's condition. Presumably, she was worried that her hair would more than likely suffer the same fate.

"As always, you're carrying many interesting weapons!"

Fear swung her spiked metal club to attack. Lilyhowell blocked using the slaughtering blade, then attacked with the flaming sword. Fear frowned at the hot air sweeping in front of her, but did not falter, instead pressing on the attack—

Full vigor. However... From Haruaki's view, both Fear and Lilyhowell's movements were not clean enough.

Upon further thought, it was only natural. The battle against Nirushaaki had taken place this morning. The date had not changed on the calendar. Fear had been trounced soundly by Konoha. Konoha's counter had also injured Lilyhowell's shoulder. Both of them had fought desperately against Nirushaaki. Their stamina could not have recovered fully yet.

However, the two of them were still fighting hard, opposing each other with indomitable wills. As though saying "it's fine as long as I extend the burning end," Kirika mobilized «Tragic» for support again.

It suddenly struck Haruaki—Was this the time to be doing this kind of thing? A sense of emptiness spontaneously rose up in his heart.

These two people in front of him, as well as the rest of them, did indeed harbor a certain kind of indomitable will, refusing to back down absolutely. But, that was...

"Nuuuuuuuuu!"

"Ohhhh!"

Fear and Lilyhowell swung vigorously in a collision, causing them to fly back at the same time. After rolling several times on the floor, Fear slowly stood up. Glaring ahead, she said:

"Huff... Huff... You should give up and throw down your swords...!"

"This I cannot—"

Using the two cursed swords for support, Lilyhowell looked at them with her gloomy eyes while struggling to stand up.

"Those swords look like they're clearly cursed. Don't you guys reject cursed tools!? You're doing these cruel and inhumane things because of cursed tools, right!? Why, why won't you stop?"

"It goes without saying. Everything is for the sake of defeating Nirushaaki..."

Lilyhowell bit her lip hard while even stronger light appeared in her eyes of darkness.

"I have long forgotten the taboo of curses. Neither do I know what is meant by a knight's honor. Walking the orthodox path is completely meaningless. Indeed, no matter what happens to me, even if I must be cursed, I do not care..."

Next, Lilyhowell—

Yelled, with even elements of sorrow in her voice:

"In my current state... All that remains is only defeating Nirushaaki. Only avenging that child—These are the only goals!"

What could be felt from her was pure and genuine resolve.

Looking at her, dressed in disheveled clothing, yelling her resolve...

Certain thoughts flashed through Haruaki's mind.

He realized what was the impulse residing in a corner of his mind all this time, unable to articulate in word. The impulse that drove him to see Lilyhowell no matter what.

Directly and firmly—Haruaki readied his resolve as well.

Hence—

"Hold it—!"

Yelling, Haruaki rushed right in between Fear and Lilyhowell. Fear exclaimed in alarm:

"Idiot, what are you doing!? Hurry and stand down!"

He was not going to stand down. Lilyhowell was already trapped in the darkness known as vengeance but she still retained a final sense of ego. She had simply removed her limiter in choosing means to achieve her goal, rather than going insane completely. Hence, she was not going to do something so meaningless as kill him—Haruaki gambled on this.

His gamble paid off. Lilyhowell simply raised an eyebrow and stared at him.

"Our main goal is to rescue Konoha who's staying by Nirushaaki's side. And your goal is to defeat Nirushaaki. If that's all there is to it—"

Haruaki gulped and continued:

"We should be able to cooperate. Let's stop fighting each other now and join forces."

"W-What are you talking about, damn shameless brat!"

"Yachi! You are..."

"Oh~ Haru, you're really going out on a limb here."

Hearing Fear and the girls cry out, Haruaki still gazed intently at Lilyhowell. Likewise, she stared back intently at Haruaki as though trying to confirm the truth of his claim.

In other words—The possibility existed.

"Right now, you're abducting people or hiring people and instigating them so that you can power up the sword that extends using people's terror, right? Instead of strengthening a single sword's power, wouldn't chances of defeating Nirushaaki be higher if you obtained our power instead and fight on the same side?"

Lilyhowell still remained silent. However, she narrowed her eyes as though ponder a certain matter.

Haruaki still had matters to declare beforehand. The minimum conditions.

"I'll state the conditions. Of course, first of all, Konoha must not be killed. That sword was called the «Wathe Breaker», right? That said, it's apparently broken already. Second condition, you can't harm ordinary people. You mustn't use other people to feed the curses like you were doing just now. As long as you're willing to abide by the conditions I've stated, we will provide you with full support in the fight against Nirushaaki."

"It is not just the «Calamitous Sword of Sigarsholm»... For example, «My Bloody Valentine» here also requires the sacrifice of others to strengthen its power."

Lilyhowell waved the slaughtering blade lightly as she spoke. Haruaki shuddered inside but—

"However—One, provided that Nirushaaki can be killed, I will resort to any means necessary. Two, in terms of overall combat potential, joining forces with you does seem more favorable. Plus three, I have already thought up a plan to defeat her. That is all. So long as you are willing to assist in my battle plan and devote your efforts to carrying it out, this proposal is worth considering."

"Really!?"

At this moment, Fear took a large step forward and pulled Haruaki's arm forcefully.

"Hold it right there, don't decide on your own! This woman is a member of the Knights' Dominion! She can't be trusted at all. Hurry and recall what atrocities those people from the Knights' Dominion have done so far!"

"Same here—I don't think this is a strategy we could recklessly commit to. Just now, she was planning to harm ordinary citizens, right? If you ask me

whether this woman is trustworthy, all I can say is that it's an absolutely ridiculous question."

Kirika agreed with Fear's opinion. Their objections were very correct.

"I can understand why you can't agree so easily. Lilyhowell here was in the process of doing something very cruel. Once everything is over, I'd like to ask her to make amends, perhaps that might even break out in a conflict, but—I believe that there's something more important than that right now. Absolutely... Konoha must be retrieved."

"..."

"Also, have you all forgotten? There's only a week's time left. Once it's over, Konoha might go somewhere else to fight that Commander guy—And who knows what'll happen. There's no time to pick and choose now."

"Well... That might be true, but..."

Kirika turned her eyes in a pleading manner, shifting her gaze towards Kuroe. Unlike Kirika and Fear, she was smiling as though enlightened.

"Fair enough. I guess I'm neutral. But as someone who's been living in that home since the past, as someone who's been living together with Kono-san until now, if I really had to say it, my feelings are the same as Haru's. Since Haru made his decision, I will follow him."

"Even you, Kuroe-kun..."

"Seriously—I'm begging you, Fear and Class Rep."

Saying that, he stared directly at the two of them. Unable to argue against him, Fear was the first to sigh.

"So unfair. You saying this, knowing clearly we can't refuse, right?"

"N-No, I'm not..."

"The result is the same either way. Suppose we refused, then you might end up saying you'll assist her with Kuroe, just the two of you. Now honestly, that would be absolutely ridiculous. We're not going to let you two hang around someone who might betray you any time. In other words, we have no choice at all..."

"—Sorry."

"Hmph, even if you apologize, you have no intention of changing your mind, right? No helping it, anyway, I'll agree for now... But make no mistake, shameless brat, we don't quite approve of this. The current situation happened all because Cow Tits was too careless, so she has to be the one to take responsibility. I believe in going so far as to join forces with an enemy."

Facing another direction, Fear pouted as she grumbled quietly again and again.

"In the end, I'm agreeing passively... My opinion is basically the same as Fear-kun's. I believe that people from the Knights' Dominion are very dangerous. If there is another way, we ought to choose another way instead—"

Kirika also spoke softly. Her gaze directed downwards, her face looked as though a million emotions were entangled in her heart.

"I know what you two are saying, but there's really no choice right now."

Haruaki felt anxious, thinking: why are these two saying such things? Of course, he knew very clearly there were risks. But compared to that, in this current situation, they should focus on thinking how to devote their full efforts towards rescuing Konoha, right? They should be more united, taking action for the single-minded goal of saving Konoha.

"I know, that's why I said I'm agreeing for now."

"Okay okay, now that both sides understand each other's view, more talking won't make any progress. Anyway, let's hear what the knight has to say, okay? Because she just mentioned 'battle plan.'"

Hearing Kuroe, Haruaki turned his gaze back to Lilyhowell.

"Indeed, a battle plan to defeat Nirushaaki."

While re-sheathing the burning sword and the slaughtering blade, in other words, showing her earnest intention to join forces with Haruaki's group, Lilyhowell spoke quietly:

"That «Wounded Knee Massacre», which renders all attacks ineffective. It actually has a weakness. And I know what that weakness is."

After roughly an hour, Fear's group returned to the abandoned hotel again. What they had been doing during that time was sending the couple to the hospital. Since the couple was still unconscious and their injuries were not severe, Fear and the others simply left them in a safe spot inside the hospital's confines then phoned to alert medical personnel.

Feeling like accomplices in a crime of abduction (in actual fact, perhaps it really was true), they returned to the vast and empty hall—Nevertheless Lilyhowell was not present. Did she run away? Fear thought for an instant but picked up movement when she perked her ears to listen, so she walked over to check things out.

In a corner of the hotel, at a place resembling a lounge, Lilyhowell was there. The wallpaper on the ceiling and walls were peeling off, a pitiful sight. But there were many sofas and tables remaining. Naturally, it was all covered with thick dust.

Lilyhowell was sitting on a sofa, bandaging her right hand, presumably treating the burns caused by that «ESP» sword.

"Hmph, if it hurts then just don't hold that sword, right?"

"The temperature of the flames at the hilt is lower than that of the blade, well within toleration."

It was useless no matter what you said to a lunatic. Fear simply shrugged in response. Haruaki spoke at this time:

"By the way, are you sure we shouldn't go somewhere else?"

"Yeah. Once those two people wake up, what if they point out this place and the police come—"

"One, I brought them here only after rendering them unconscious. Two, after awakening, all they could see was a space dominated by bare concrete. I doubt that they would have thoughts to spare on memorizing their surroundings. That is all. I conclude that the police will not investigate this place immediately."

"It'd better be true. Hmph, absolutely ridiculous..."

Lilyhowell seemed to have just finished bandaging. Seeing her make no signs to move, Fear and the rest exchanged glances, then sat down after patting away the dust on the sofa slightly. This produced a situation where they were sitting opposite to Lilyhowell across a table.

(How troubling, why do things always turn out like this...?)

Fear thought blankly. Her view had not changed at all. She did not want to cooperate with this woman, but if this was the only way, there was no helping it. That was all there was to it.

In other words, she only accepted the current situation because there was "no other way."

However—there was this impatient feeling in her heart that could not be explained completely by this.

Somehow, she felt that something was bothering her.

Tentatively, it could be attributed to wariness and distrust towards Lilyhowell that she ultimately could not dispel completely. However—The problem was... The problem lay with...

Not others but herself. She seemed to be doubting in her heart: Was this kind of reason really true?

Inexplicably, she felt deeply guilty about the presence of this doubt. Although she had no idea why, subconsciously, that was what it felt like.

She glanced beside her. Although hidden very skillfully, Kirika was also exuding the same sense of unease. Although it was only intuition, Fear felt that Kirika was feeling the exact same thing as her. Similarly confronted with a situation that could be accepted with logic, but impossible to feel at ease, yet doubting one's own reasons for feeling uneasy, hence not knowing what to do.

Seriously...

The reason for this unbelievable feeling of being bothered by the current circumstances, what exactly was it...?

"I will tell you directly what I know. First of all, Nirushaaki will die if her back is attacked."

" " "..."

Hearing Lilyhowell's first words, the entire group remained silent, exchanged glances then looked forward again to confirm that Lilyhowell's expression had not changed at all.

"Th-That's way too direct! At least start with an introduction, I'll curse you!"

"Hmm, I really wish you'd at least start by saying something like 'about the battle plan mentioned earlier...' If you suddenly say something so important, it almost went in one ear and out the other."

"Yes. But that really is simple to an absolutely ridiculous extent..."

"I-Is it for real?"

They exclaimed one after another. In contrast, Lilyhowell continued in a calm voice:

"Of course, no one has confirmed it. But this information should be quite accurate."

"The Lab Chief's Nation has not told about this. How do you know something that they don't?"

"The Knights' Dominion first designated Nirushaaki as the «Knight Killer» and has been tracking her down ever since. Having a separate information network is only natural. That woman's equipment—The tip regarding this weakness is also the latest news on this information network."

Speaking of which, this was also what led to the welcoming festival incident. Fear recalled the girl who had gotten caught up in the affair and lost her life. She was both a trainee of the Draconians and definitely just a pure underclassman. Fear recalled the weight of the second Rubik's cube in her pocket. Her murderer was the knight Neto from the Knights' Dominion. This was also one of the reasons why Fear was unable to trust the Knights' Dominion.

"This information was not yet known back when we went to your school. Suppose I actually faced off against Nirushaaki, together with Neto and the rest, I really have no idea what would have resulted. Perhaps like the numerous victims who fell to the «Knight Killer», not only would we have failed to enact vengeance but also end up slaughtered."

Lilyhowell's hands seemed to creak as she clenched them together in a fist. Did she recall something? Like Fear, did she recall something that made her angry?

"...Hmph. Come to think of it, you also deceived us back then. Who knows if your words are honest and trustworthy this time?"

Fear glared at her with the intent to restrain.

"I can only ask you to believe. The situation is different from that time—Currently, our goals are the same."

Although Fear was angry, things were not going to progress if all she did was show skepticism. Going "hmpf" overtly again, Fear first emphasized her wariness.

"Back to the matter at hand. In other words, «Wounded Knee Massacre»'s curse-granted ability is neutralizing attacks inflicted from the front and the sides whereas its curse is that death results from any attack to the back no matter how minor. But because this tool originates from an American Indian surviving a rain of bullets during a massacre, acquiring its curse after that, consequently, it is expected to possess the trait of full immunity against bullets. Even gunfire shot from behind would probably not work."

"Then what about using my hair or firing arrows from bows primitively, for example?"

"It should work. But at the current stage, attacking her with bows and arrows is infinitely close to impossible. This is because the Japanese sword is suited to defending against arrows. Furthermore, she has two of them."

"Muu. Speaking of which, I remember Cow Tits mentioning before that her body would automatically intercept projectiles even without paying particular attention..."

"Then the remaining method is to circle around behind her and attack directly."

As soon as Kirika finished, Lilyhowell shook her head lightly.

"Ignoring instances when the difference in ability is huge, normally, it is extremely difficult to get around to a master's back. After all, neither Fear-in-Cube nor I were able to circle around to her back at all, even when attacking simultaneously."

"Yeah. Nirshaaki's own movement techniques are quite masterful too... Oh right, I haven't forgotten how you used me as bait back then! I demand apologies and compensation!"

Lilyhowell ignored her as though failing to hear at all. What a shameless woman.

"With Kotetsu and Muramasa, the difficulties would be multiplied. Whether in sword or human form, they will probably pay attention to Nirushaaki's back. In other words, an attack to the back is «Wounded Knee Massacre»'s greatest weakness, but consequently, the enemy will be guarding it securely."

"Th-Then what should we do? You have a battle plan to get around this predicament, right?"

"—No."

"What did you say——!"

Fear yelled again in surprise, but Lilyhowell continued as though saying "do not misunderstand":

"More precisely, another weakness of hers should be attacked. Although it's perfectly logical, «Wounded Knee Massacre»'s protection does not extend to any part of the body its fabric does not cover. Hence, her limbs should be attacked."

"...This point is also simple to the point of absolute ridiculousness."

"Speaking of which, what's the point of saying all that about her back? A feint for your own amusement?"

"No. I am simply thinking that I ought to explain everything I know about «Wounded Knee Massacre» without holding back any information. Since we are fighting alongside, I should disclose all information first to avoid eliciting unnecessary wariness in your hearts."

"Hmph, if that's the case, say so earlier... But telling us everything is only expected, we're not going to lower our guard just because of something so trivial. Anyway, the battle plan you're proposing still has the same problem as before, right? In other words, Kotetsu and Cow Tits. This isn't easy at all. Besides, attacking a person's limbs is actually unexpectedly difficult. Especially if the enemy is inexperienced in battle."

Lilyhowell nodded lightly in agreement.

"Hence, all participants must be mobilized to seal off the enemy's movements first. Fear-in-Cube and I shall handle one Japanese sword each. Then using your hair and belt Wathes, immobilize Nirushaaki. Having done that, there should be at least an instant of opportunity to deliver a strike to her arm or leg."

"Hmm? Why not use the chance to stab her in the back with my hair?"

"After analyzing both sides' combat potential, the method I am proposing currently is the limit. Restricting her movement is probably impossible if any segment of the plan fails. Circling behind her or attacking her back after restraining her would be a little redundant and might be too late. An attack to a limb is already the limit."

"Hmph. Your combat potential analysis huh..."

"One, I have led «Knight Squads» many times in the past, which requires an accurate grasp of collective combat potential in order to devise tactics as squad leader. Two, I have already witness your methods of fighting a number of times, memorizing them. That is all. I am confident in the high degree of accuracy in my tactical analysis. But ultimately, all I can do ask you to believe."

At this point, Haruaki looked up.

"Hold on. In other words, while everyone is fighting together and Nirushaaki is successfully restrained, perhaps there's an instant when it's possible to create a chance to deliver one attack to her limb? But that by itself isn't going to change the situation, besides—"

Fear also realized it. There was a decisive hole in Lilyhowell's explanations, but she must be aware of it herself. Interrupting Haruaki, Lilyhowell said:

"So long as there is a method to end the match with one attack to an arm or a leg, there is no problem. This must be your concern...? Everyone is occupied with just barely restraining Nirushaaki and no one is left to attack her limb? The answer is simple."

Turning her face, Lilyhowell looked at the one who had posed the question.

Then with an expression filled with dark resolve, she announced:

"Yachi Haruaki, you are the key to this battle plan. You will personally end this battle."

At first, Fear totally failed to understand what Lilyhowell was talking about, but gradually, her mind began to comprehend that this woman had made an extremely ridiculous suggestion.

"You...!"

"Please explain what you mean by that."

Before Fear could speak, Haruaki questioned her swiftly. In an incredibly calm voice, with incredibly serious eyes. As though stunned, Fear suppressed her voice in her throat.

Lilyhowell turned her head lightly to gesture towards one of the scabbards on her back. A magnificently ornate scabbard of jet black.

"This is the «Toxic Sword Poison Ritter», a sword that delivers unavoidable toxins once the target is cut. In other words, even if just an arm or a leg, even if just a scratch, one strike is all it takes to seal victory."

"So scary~ But why didn't you use it so far if you've got such a powerful weapon?"

"The price is its powerful curse. As soon as the sword is unsheathed, the wielder is also poisoned and will die shortly."

The reason was very simple. Lilyhowell shifted her gaze away from the silent Kuroe and looked at Haruaki again.

"I took this sword out, prepared to die with my enemy in mutual annihilation, but I cannot guarantee I can land an attack on her before I collapse. Hence, this is a final resort for me when all else fails. Simply a gamble."

Haruaki's eyes remained serious as he spoke quietly:

"But for me—it's different."

"Indeed. You will not be cursed. It is said that curses do not activate once Wathes come into your possession. In that case, you shall be the one to use this sword. The enemy probably will not expect you to enter the fray to attack. It should catch them unprepared."

Feeling that Lilyhowell was moving the discussion without consultation, Fear could not help but interrupt.

"Hold it, there should be other ways, right? Like having me use the sword in Haruaki's stead, how's that? After all, I'm not human—"

"Once you take on human form, you possess human characteristics. Very likely, your kind will be poisoned too. The toxin formed from the curse will corrode your very existence itself."

"Guh..."

Fear turned her gaze. Kuroe listened with a face showing unreadable thoughts whereas Kirika was showing a troubled expression. As though finding allies, Fear spoke again:

"B-But, letting Haruaki go to the frontlines is still too dangerous. He's a total amateur."

"Yes, it's absolutely ridiculous. The risk is far too high..."

"Yachi Haruaki will only swing this sword after Nirushaaki is restrained. The risk of a counterattack is virtually zero, at least for the first strike. It is for this purpose that Nirushaaki must be restrained."

Seeing Lilyhowell speak so calmly, Fear could not help but fly into a rage. She could feel a sense that Lilyhowell was taking Haruaki's risks too lightly, even dismissing them as completely unimportant.

"The risk is not zero! No one can predict what happens in a battle! Also..."

Fear realized in alarm and swallowed the words she originally wanted to say directly. These words were too heavy to speak aloud.

She had noticed early on. Although she did not know if it was intentional on Lilyhowell's part, Lilyhowell had not explained clearly the poisoned sword's potency. All she said was that victory would be sealed. Could these words actually mean—

(Yeah, that's right. I can't agree to this proposal without thinking.)

Even if it was to rescue Konoha.

Otherwise, Haruaki—

That Haruaki, always with a laid back expression, calm and wizened—

Perhaps he would end up having to personally murder—

"Fear, Class Rep... It's okay. I'm willing to do it."

Although it was unclear whether he was aware of this possibility...

Haruaki spoke every word clearly with resolute eyes.

Fear and Kirika exchanged a glance for merely an instant then sighed lightly at the same time. That expression of his meant that nothing they say

could dissuade him. Just like the look he made when deciding to join forces with Lilyhowell.

"Listen here. Using this sword does not need any circling around to her back. The simpler the steps required for victory, the better. I fear that Nirushaaki can only be restrained for an instant. Absolutely do not be greedy or attempt to make any redundant movements, leading to the plan's failure."

"So you're asking me to give up on attacking her back?"

"Indeed. Target a limb from the very start. However, swinging a sword as an amateur, you might not necessarily strike the spot you are aiming. In order to seize the one chance without error, you must undergo training. You must get used to this sword's weight, center of gravity, shape, how to maintain balance with your own strength, the feeling of swinging the sword, etc—"

"I am willing to do all that. But you are the only one who knows how to swing a sword. Will you teach me?"

"A done deal. A week of training may be brief, but it will not be meaningless."

Fear clenched her fist tightly, pondering what she could do.

The situation seemed to be developing in a direction of no return. But perhaps this had been the case starting a while ago. Starting from the moment Konoha fell into the enemy's hands, it had been the case all along.

Haruaki was running along that path at maximum speed, staring straight ahead unerringly. No matter whether that path ran past cliffs or bottomless swamps, he advanced with reckless abandon. Too dangerous. Even if they warned him of cliffs or swamps, surely he would not halt his steps. In that case, no matter what emotions she felt in her heart, all she could do was follow him. She hoped that she would be able to reach out and pull him up just before he fell off a cliff or was devoured by a swamp.

"No helping it, I'll join the training as well. I must watch you to make sure you don't do anything funny."

"Yes. If anything happens to Yachi, we will punish you with everything at our disposal. Don't even think about it."

"So this'll be what's called a crash course. Feels quite rare~"

Fear stared directly at Haruaki. After noticing her gaze as well, he smiled. Seeing the same smile he usually displayed in the living room, Fear felt a particularly poignant heartache.

"Sorry, Fear."

"I—haven't done anything. You're the one taking action. Why are you choosing risky means on purpose? You can spend a little more time to think up a better way."

"Why huh..."

Haruaki's eyes showed reminiscence before he answered:

"Yeah. It's because I feel that... My showing was far too poor this morning."

"..."

"Rescued by Class Rep, my legs shaking nonstop, punched flying by Konoha. She found me to be nothing more than a useless man."

Haruaki laughed slightly wryly. "Haha."

"That's why—I was thinking I must show Konoha my cool side. Once everything is over and she comes home, I can tell her I tried my best too, not just watching from the sidelines like a loser."

This great big idiot—Fear could only murmur in her mind.

At the same time, Kirika exhaled lightly next to her. Hence, Fear thought to herself that Kirika was probably uttering her usual catchphrase quietly in the bottom of her heart.

Part 7

Amidst complete darkness...

In the depths of the abandoned hotel where even moonlight did not reach, this cramped venue appeared to be a linen room. Covered with a tattered blanket that was left there, Lilyhowell was sitting on the floor with knees drawn to her chest.

Nothing but silence all around. Apparently... The crash course was starting the next day. Those people had already gone home.

This could very well be the first time she had spoken so much ever since that day, Lilyhowell thought. That day. That day when they had invaded Taishyuu High. That day when Neto was defeated. Then—

"...!"

She placed her hand lightly on the abdominal wound where she had been pierced on that day, the stitch scars remaining after she hired a black market doctor for treatment. Thanks to several months' worth of time, together with the life of the girl who had acted as her shield, pierced at the same time, Lilyhowell almost felt no more pain from the wound. However...

She felt that this was tantamount to forgetting, a contemptible act of oblivion.

Hence, she reached her hand beneath her shirt, stroking the wound with her fingertips. Slight pain reawakened. Prompted by this, the memories of that instant dominated her mind. Their overlapping bodies, the warmth of the abdomen, the hair of the back of her head waving before Lilyhowell's eyes. Fragrant strands of hair. When embracing her, burying her nose into there, smelling that fragrance, Lilyhowell had experienced bliss concretely. She originally thought this bliss would persist forever—

However...

She pierced the wound with her fingertip. The density of the scenes that must not be forgotten instantly rose. At this time, she no longer had thoughts to spare on the taste. That girl's sorrowful scream. Those words conveying the wish to protect the knight before her, putting the worth of her own existence on the line. While listening to that, what had she felt?

With Nirushaaki in front of her, what had she felt?

(Admit it, Lilyhowell Kilmister.)

Confronted with the enemy's overwhelming strength...

Confronted with the enemy's overwhelming vigor...

(You! Felt it... Terror...!)

Cursing herself, she allowed her fingertip to go deeper. A sense of numbing pain. But that girl's pain was nowhere near this trivial.

(Laurica... Sorry...)

Back then, she had betrayed Laurica.

Shamefully, she had betrayed Laurica who had believed her to be a true knight.

Hence... Hence—

Surrounded by cramped darkness, Lilyhowell panted lightly as she withdrew her finger from under her clothing. She licked it to find the slight flavor of blood. This flavor also helped her to recall her abject state back then, sprawled on the ground.

(Having survived, there is only one remaining meaning to my existence. Namely, to avenge you... To atone for the terror I felt at the time. Hence, watch, Laurica. No matter what I do, no matter what means I take. Indeed, even if this body will be cursed—I will definitely kill Nirushaaki—!)

She could feel cold, black flames burning in the depths of her heart. The name nurturing such paradoxical flames must surely be vengeance. Frozen like the ice of permafrost, these flames were absolutely impossible to melt. But just like the flames of purgatory, all that they touched shall be incinerated until nothing remained.

(Soon. It will be soon...)

She closed her eyes lightly, pondering what was to come.

In order to kill Nirushaaki, preparations were progressing step by step. The assistance of Fear-in-Cube's faction, as well as the few lies she had told them—These two factors shall led her towards the one and only desired result.

However, Lilyhowell felt that one of the lies was truly insignificant. Nothing to do with her, it only concerned them. They had asked whether «Bartolomey Oblivion» possessed a reset function. Her answer: "No idea, because I only teamed up for the first time with Laurica on that mission." —However, those were teammates whom she had trusted with her life. Upon forming the knight squad, Lilyhowell had read their profiles at least.

In other words, she actually knew that the mask did not have a reset function at all.

Naturally, she had lied because she was worried they would lose their goal as a result and even give up fighting alongside her, turning to ponder other methods instead. She did not think she had done something bad.

Uninterested, unconcerned. So long as her one and only objective could be achieved, it was enough.

Amidst hazy thoughts before descending into the realm of dreams, she pondered with interest. She was surely going to kill Nirushaaki. That woman shall die embracing the delusion known as strength—But after that, how was the situation going to develop?

There were probably two factors that would dominate the situation after Nirushaaki's death.

One, because no solution could be found, Muramasa's memory would remain unrecoverable even after Nirushaaki's death.

Two, if everything went according to her deductions—

By that time, Yachi Haruaki would already be dead.

Then the remaining development was going to be mutual slaughter.

Kotetsu and Muramasa seemed to respect their master's strength sincerely. They might very well adhere to the warrior's spirit of bushido and avenge their master. Even if not for revenge, they were probably going to continue fighting, in accordance with their traits as cursed tools, as swords and battle maniacs. For the sake of satisfying their curses—to view fresh blood, to drink fresh blood, they were going to continue fighting.

On the other hand, having lost Yachi Haruaki, Fear-in-Cube would probably retaliate without hesitation. Lilyhowell did not think she would be able to withstand the shock. Fear-in-Cube would probably fall into insanity and retaliate, not stopping until she had killed everything in sight.

In other words, the end result would be limited to one out of two options.

Either the destruction of Muramasa and Kotetsu, or alternatively, the destruction of Fear-in-Cube.

(Ho...)

Lilyhowell smiled for the first time in a long while. Precisely because she was surrounded by darkness without any outsiders, precisely because she was just about to succumb to dreams, only now could this smile of resignation surface. It was also possible that she was simply smiling within a dream and that her face had not even moved in reality.

No matter which result came to pass, it had nothing to do with her after killing Nirushaaki.

Furthermore—

Because having accomplished this objective, she would most likely be dead already with extremely high probability.

Chapter 4 - The Progression Known as Training; Its Terror / "The blade - It's heavy."

Part 1

Starting the next day, Haruaki was going to begin his crash course at Lilyhowell's lair. Naturally, there was currently no time to spare for attending lessons so skipping school was the only option.

The crash course's venue was the vast and empty party hall. Leaning against the wall, Fear and the girls were monitoring Lilyhowell's every move with wary and watchful eyes. Haruaki understood how they felt but also thought to himself that excessive wariness would also make it difficult for him to train.

Seeming completely unfazed by the pressure exerted by those gazes, Lilyhowell said:

"Try drawing the sword."

Then she handed the magnificently ornate scabbard of black to him. Haruaki slowly attempted to draw out the sword—shining similarly with black luster, the blade made its appearance. Roughly a meter long, it was normal length for a sword. So this was the «Toxic Sword Poison Ritter»?

Naturally, he could feel that this was different from the weapon he had held in these hands to this date. Namely, it was different from the sword that was Konoha. Currently, the sword in his hand did not feel as light as Konoha. Neither was there a sense of trust allowing him to entrust himself to it without worry. Ultimately, this was nothing more than a block of cursed steel.

At this time, Lilyhowell looked at him in an intriguing manner. She was probably confirming whether the curse was activating or not.

"How is it?"

"If you ask me how is it... Hmm, it's basically a sword. Say, am I going to train using the real thing? Isn't that too dangerous?"

Standing next to Fear, Kirika also expressed agreement:

"That's right. The toxin will spread from a single scratch inflicted by that sword, right? If Yachi fell down accidentally and got scratched, everything

would be over. Even for Yachi, the curse from a curse-granted ability cannot be prevented."

"Also, how should i say this? Sparring exercises are needed as well, right? The thought of scratching the other person fills me with dread."

"...I see. This is quite an oversight..."

Lilyhowell pondered for a moment, then finally nodded as though saying "no helping it." Glancing at Haruaki, she said:

"Re-sheathe the sword and give it to me."

"O-Okay."

Haruaki carefully inserted the poisonous sword into its scabbard then handed it over to Lilyhowell. Next, she took out another sword from her back together with its scabbard, then handed it over to Haruaki like just now—This time, it was a predominantly white sword. The scabbard was decorated in a manner similar to the «Toxic Sword Poison Ritter».

"This is?"

"Use it as a practice sword. Its shape and weight are both similar to the «Toxic Sword Poison Ritter»'s."

"I see, then of course, it's better to use this."

Haruaki drew out the sword to reveal a blade shining with a noble milky white luster. Apart from that, the sword's shape and the feeling when holding it were both very similar as Lilyhowell said.

"You're right. So what's this sword called? What curse does it have?"

Probably concentrating while returning the poisonous sword and its scabbard to her back, it took Lilyhowell a while before she answered:

"...Name? It is called... «Alius». Its curse is nothing special. If you face the enemy while losing your courage, the sword becomes blunt. Conversely, the more courageous you are, the sharper it becomes..."

"Oh..."

"You're conveniently carrying many spare weapons. Aren't they too similar to be coincidence?"

"Simply by chance—Although it's also possible that some of these swords were forged by the same person. In any case, these swords were all borrowed from the weapons vault of the Knights' Dominion. It would not be surprising if they were kept together according to some system of categorization."

Sitting formally in seiza in front of Fear and the others, taking on an audience role, Kuroe sipped tea from a thermos and said:

"Borrowed~? Judging from how you said it last time, that doesn't sound quite right. You probably robbed by force..."

"I do not deny that."

Then—Lilyhowell turned towards Haruaki again and said "first try swinging it however you want." Haruaki casually picked up the borrowed white sword «Alius» and attempted a vertical swing. Unexpectedly, it felt heavier than it looked, causing his body to be pulled forward. Then he tried a horizontal sweep. Different from swinging a baseball bat, after all, it made him stumble unsteadily.

"Swords are essentially pieces of metal. Looks like you need to grow accustomed to the sword's weight first. It simply will not do if your movements are affected by the sword's weight."

"...In other words?"

"One, start with practice swings until you grow accustomed to the weight. Two, rest when you are tired. That is all. If I notice anything else, I will inform you."

The first day's training was apparently far simpler than imagined. Haruaki could feel his arm muscles shaking and trembling because they were not used to the weight, but he still raised the sword again, learning by watching, swinging the sword.

Sweat flowing on his forehead, the screams of muscle ache, all these led to the path of Konoha's rescue.

As soon as he thought that, of course he could not possibly feel tired.

Part 2

"Nohoooooooo! Nnn ah, hee, yah..."

"..."

"W-Wait, don't... rub that kind of spot... so hard... Nnn... Haah..."

"Awawawa. What should I do? Faced with this situation, even I'm hesitating over whether it's appropriate to take out my camera!"

"..."

"Nnnnnngh! Ah, hah... The front... The back... The front again—? K-Kirika! It's enough, Kirika! Hey—!"

"Hmm...? Oh!"

Kirika suddenly looked up, noticing with startlement. Before her eyes, Kuroe's hair was raised in midair while the «Tragic Black River» was in action—How should this scene be described? In a sexual manner difficult to articulate in few words, Fear was suffering tight bondage. Kirika frantically released the «Tragic Black River» then remembered.

(Oh right. I remember we were discussing how it's too boring to simply watch Yachi training. While monitoring Lilyhowell, we should do something to avoid wasting time...)

Hence, Kuroe had suggested: "On further thought, I've never practiced seriously how to restrain others." Hence, in order to use their own weapons in a more experienced manner—and for the sake of slightly improving their restraining skills—Kirika and Kuroe had asked Fear to serve as their practice target for special training. This was because the two of them were tasked with restraining Nirushaaki.



"Hmm~ Looking at the binding method just now... If it's my move, I'd definitely name it «Sexual Harassment Motomori». Should I pirate it for my own use?"

"S-Sorry, I think I spaced out slightly. How absolutely ridiculous..."

"Yeah, let's take a short break. There's tea in the flask~"

"Oh actually, I've brought rice crackers too."

While listening to this dialogue, Kirika glanced sideways to see him ahead, currently practicing his sword swings with single-minded focus. Lilyhowell was sitting on the floor slightly farther away, watching him intently.

Kirika's mind was slightly in a daze while she took a break together with Fear.

Honestly speaking—She found herself lacking in motivation.

Why was that? —She pondered. Speaking of which, why did she feel so bothered about the matter of fighting alongside Lilyhowell? And why was she unable to erase that kind of feeling? Then also pondering—She wondered why there was this feeling of finding excuses for her own reasons?

She took a sip of the tea that Kuroe had handed over. She originally wanted to look at Haruaki but inexplicably, she stopped halfway in turning her head, turning her gaze back to the steaming surface of the tea.

The more she introspected—for some reason—the more she dared not look at him.

(Hmm, in other words...)

As expected, absolutely ridiculous. She would feel guilty. Conversely, she took this as evidence of her ugly heart existing inside.

The reason why she felt unmotivated...

Was because deep in her heart...

She was harboring thoughts of "what if she never came back"—

If she forgot the confession she had witnessed—no, if she forgot all of her memories from before the confession, Kirika would be able to take her

place by his side. It was probably because she was harboring this sort of incurably ugly delusion—

No. She hoped not. This sort of notion was not allowed.

However, inside her heart, another self was unable to deny these thoughts completely. Kirika was aware that these thoughts would give birth to feelings so tragic it would make her want to cry, but she also felt that no matter how much she tried to erase them, they would still remain attached somewhere in the depths of her heart, impossible to remove.

(I'm the worst...)

The depths of her chest and the interior of her abdomen were filled with thick and rotten mud. She really wanted to pluck out those internal organs, filthy because they were ugly, then cleanse them thoroughly with detergent—

But then it struck her. She was actually capable of doing that in fact. How ugly to the extreme.

Part 3

"Huff... Huff..."

"One, your speed has slowed. Two, your movements are getting sloppy. That is all. In light of that, I suggest you rest—That is what they are doing as well."

Haruaki turned his head to see Fear and the others sitting down for tea as pointed out. Fear was eating rice crackers, Kuroe was sipping hot tea casually with partially closed eyes, whereas Kirika was spacing out for some reason with a slightly gloomy expression.

"You're right... Then I'll take a brief break. Let's go."

"...?"

"Don't stare with those kinds of eyes. It's just a passing favor. I've prepared your portion of tea at least."

"No, I—"

"There, there."

Urged forcefully, she slowly stood up from the floor where she was sitting.

"Sorry to interrupt! Two more cups of tea, please."

"Muu!"

Noticing Lilyhowell's presence, Fear frowned but probably thinking it was not quite right to leave her out, she finally went "hmph."

"Suit yourselves. But I'm not gonna share my rice crackers with you two."

"Here you go~ It's still very hot, so be careful."

Kuroe poured tea into a paper cup she had brought. Then Haruaki handed the cup over to Lilyhowell. Expressionless with unreadable thoughts, she took the paper cup. Could it be that she doesn't dare drink Japanese tea—Just as Haruaki wondered, she sat down in the outskirts, slightly distancing herself from the group, then started drinking silently. Despite her cold attitude, it was fortunate that she was still willing to drink tea—Haruaki thought.

"..."

For quite a while, the only sound heard was that of Fear chewing rice crackers nonstop. A slight sense of tension was hanging in the air—as one would expect, the problem lay with Lilyhowell. Since they were going to fight alongside one another next, chatting a bit with her should not be useless. Hence, Haruaki decided to talk to her. Any topic would do.

"Right, I've been wanting to ask you. Nirushaaki is also wearing that weird mask, right? Is that a cursed tool as well.?"

The answer came after a few seconds' pause.

"...Apparently so. I am not privy to the details but reportedly, it is a Wathe of the self-augmentation type."

"Like the Family's Hinai Elsie... in other words, similar to that girl's «Clockwork Life», I suppose."

"«Four Minutes»? Compared to that, of course the effect is inferior. From what I have heard, Nirushaaki's mask merely "increases strength and reflexes" on an assistive level. Probably nothing to be too concerned about."

Lilyhowell finished quietly and took a sip of tea.

"Okay... Oh, I'd like to ask another question related to cursed tools. What Kuroe mentioned earlier—about the many cursed swords you are carrying. Are they really robbed from the weapons vault of the Knights' Dominion?"

"I remember saying I do not deny it."

"Then isn't that bad? Umm, won't the Knights' Dominion get mad? In terms of standpoint—"

"No matter. Provided it is possible to kill Nirushaaki... I do not care about anything after that."

Dark light resided in her eyes. Without looking anywhere in particular, she gazed at the concrete walls of these rundown ruins, speaking softly. Haruaki once again experienced the obsessive will behind them as well as an emotion akin to blind determination.

"But isn't it tough to carry so many swords? Stuff like curses for example."

"This I do not deny either... Perfect timing. Allow me to recharge the curse of one of the swords. For example, this «Epetamu» here—"

While speaking, Lilyhowell drew out a dagger-like weapon from her back. Perhaps she noticed Fear and the girls watching her suddenly draw a blade, because her shoulder shook abruptly. She simply continued searching her lower body's pockets to take out something—a number of expensive-looking rings with large gemstones. After she pressed those rings against the dagger's blade in a rough manner, the gemstones on the rings were instantly absorbed by the blade, disappearing out of sight.

"Eh? What's going on?"

"This comes from the indigenous tribes from the northern part of your country... Called the Ainu, are they not? A man-eating blade from tribal legends. A cursed blade that moves autonomously every night to kill people. Just as told by the legend, it will behave itself as long as stones are fed to it. Hence, this dagger's curse requires feeding valuable minerals to it in this manner. Otherwise, this dagger will move on its own to kill people indiscriminately, even attacking its owner. I certainly have no wish for this dagger to come flying in my sleep."

"Uwah~ That's too wasteful. This curse hits the wallet way too hard."

Kuroe murmured quietly in astonishment. Whether the gemstones just now or the money paid to hire those men yesterday, Lilyhowell's expenses

seemed extraordinarily heavy. However, Haruaki did not dare ask her how she acquired her funds, deciding it would be best not to inquire.

Lilyhowell spoke while re-sheathing that «Epetamu»:

"It is nothing if a curse can be handled so easily. Personally, among those taken from the Knights' Dominion's vault, «Stick Me Please» has the most horrific curse, although the sword is already destroyed."

"That's the sword you drew out before you escaped, right? Just to kill time, can I ask what curse did it have?"

"As indicated by the name, the sword demands that the owner's body put the concept of 'penetration' into practice."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"The curse requires giving it the feeling of 'penetration.' Otherwise, the sword will penetrate the owner's body on its own. Under normal conditions, the user apparently uses stakes or nails to penetrate their flesh, but considering I still have to fight in the future, I wanted to minimize damage to the body. But very fortunately, I am a woman and there is a certain part of the body whose anatomy is most suited to penetration. As a result, I used that place to—"

"Hey—! Hold it right there, aren't you talking about something very dangerous!?"

"Heave-ho! Heave-ho! Come, Haru, do this together with me!"

"Wait, you two are making too much noise, I can't hear! Penetrate what?"

"It's best you don't hear! You can also terminate this subject!"

"Is that so? In any case, I am no longer bound by that curse. To be honest, I am relieved. Although I am a lesbian, I did consider earlier that one day I might need to endure briefly and find a male to assist me—"

"Hey! I told you to stop! I'll curse you!"

The situation became inexplicably noisy all of a sudden. But in the middle of all this, Kirika was still sipping tea blankly. What exactly was up with her?

"Class Rep, is something wrong?"

"Eh? Oh, nothing... Sorry, I'm just spacing out and didn't hear what you guys were saying. What's the matter?"

"Kirika, don't bother, it's just stuff that would make you shout 'Absolutely ridiculous!' at this shameless brat as usual. Why don't you shout it once right now?"

"Why must I shout...?"

"Haha, never mind. There's always next time."

Kirika smiled lifelessly. She really looked drained but Haruaki was already too occupied to tend to her.

Just at this moment, Lilyhowell spoke quietly as though reminiscing:

"Let me clarify one thing first. Perhaps you may be harboring hopes, but among the Wathes in my current possession, none of them are fitted with Indulgence Disks."

"Hmph, I wasn't harboring hopes at all. That said, I do want Indulgence Disks, of course. Once the current affair is over, I'll continue searching. Since you're a member of the Knights' Dominion after all, you should at least know where some of them are?"

"I have no way of knowing who possesses what W athe and whether they are equipped with Indulgence Disks. Besides, from our perspective, that sort of thing is merely an ordinary device for lightening curses. Its level of importance is akin to whether fabric is wrapped around a sword's hilt to prevent slippage. One would not normally pay particular attention..."

"Hmph, how useless."

The dialogue ended there temporarily until Kuroe spoke up as though thinking of something on the spot:

"Oh right, take that Ainu dagger for example, the Dominion's weapons vault really seems to keep anything without being picky. I was thinking it'd be like a scene from a fantasy movie with a huge pile of western armor or swords laid out in a row."

"The Knights' Dominion has more than one weapons vault. It is just that the one I visited happened to house many Wathes of this type, with long histories and appearances in legends. Perhaps in other weapons vaults, there are places gathering western Wathes of your imagination."

"Legends... That sounds very amazing."

Hearing their remarks, Lilyhowell shook her head lightly.

"But it is virtually impossible to discern whether they are actually the weapons featured in legends or tales. Neither is it possible to confirm whether people gave them names from legends only because their curses and traits resembled the legends. In any case, I do not believe that all of these Wathes existed since the distant past. However, among them... Surely there exist real artifacts that date so far back that the years are impossible to count."

"Age isn't necessarily the higher the better. Isn't that right, Kuroe?"

"Yeah, I'm currently at an age where it's not too convenient for me to reveal how old I actually am. Speaking of which, are those legends mostly anecdotes of a certain type?"

"Indeed. Mostly the likes of cursed swords appearing in Norse sagas and eddas. «Calamitous Sword of Sigarsholm» is one of them. The name Sigarsholm appears in *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* from the Poetic Edda. Again, it is unknown whether this sword was named by later people to imitate the poem or if it is actually a sword described in that story."

"Oh... Does the black sword you're lending me have a similar origin?"

"That is the Champion-Killer's—"

For some reason, Lilyhowell paused there temporarily. Haruaki tilted his head.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing... I simply needed time to remember. The «Toxic Sword Poison Ritter» appeared in the Saga of Asmund the Champion-Killer. It was a revenge story where a hero was slain. Legend has it that the sword was coated with poison."

"What about this white sword for practicing... It's the «Alius», right? Is it the same with this sword? Their shapes are very similar."

"In... deed. It also appeared in the same saga."

Lilyhowell finished by muttering quietly. As though trying to change the subject, this time it was her turn to start asking questions.

"Speaking of legends, the Muramasa you are trying to take back is also a sword of legend, yes? Simply out of curiosity, I would like to ask: what kind of sword is she?"

"Just ordinary Cow Tits, Cow Tits. Fat and flabby."

Seeing Fear reflexively give an instant answer, Haruaki smiled wryly while thinking back. A sword of legend. Perhaps that really was the case. But did he ever gather that kind of impression from her?

Naturally, with a nostalgic state of mind, Haruaki recalled how Konoha was when she first arrived at the Yachi home.

"You're right, I guess. At least there wasn't much of a feeling like a sword of legend. Because..."

Part 4

His father was frequently away from home. At first, Haruaki would buy takeout such as lunchboxes but eating outside food all the time, he soon grew tired of it. Hence, he started cooking on his own. But being young, after all, he could not cook very well in the beginning, of course.

"Eh~ That's weird, I clearly followed the steps in the book..."

Haruaki frowned and looked at the ginger-fried pork on the plate. However, the food on the plate was charred so black that it was impossible to know what it was unless the name of the dish was mentioned. Oily and greasy, it really did not look like something edible.

I'll cook dinner tonight! He had already boasted confidently. But currently, the only other housemate was waiting on an empty stomach. I guess I've no choice but to order takeout and announce to her that I failed—Just as he thought that, the aforementioned housemate entered the kitchen with displeased look.

"Hmm~ Thou art not done yet? I am so utterly famished... Oh my?"

"Oh! This is... Umm—"

"..."

Because I'm not used to cooking. Because it's my first time. Because the explanation in the recipe is too difficult to understand—Just as Haruaki averted his gaze in embarrassment, trying to explain himself—

She reached for the plate and used her fingers directly to pick up a piece of burnt and blackened pork, tossing it into her mouth.

"...Hmph, such abominable taste."

While commenting gruffly, she was still moving her mouth to chew. Even though one could clearly tell from sight alone that the food was bad. Even though there was clearly no need to eat it at all.

Swallowing the burnt meat with a gulp, she scoffed again and turned around, about to leave the kitchen.

"H-Hear me out! Umm, uh—I-I won't fail again next time!"

He frantically promised towards her back.

Looking back at him, she grinned over her shoulder.

"So long as 'tis meat, I care not either way. If thou failest again next time, perhaps I shall dine upon your flesh."

Speaking of failures, of course he was not the only one who failed. Naturally, she had her own failures too. They could be described as similar to the situations when Fear first moved into the Yachi home, except with the difference that she was not particularly trying to help others.

For example—On a certain day in the past, just as he was spacing out, she had dashed out of the living room and into the garden. Then taking a leap after a running start, she landed on top of a utility pole outside the house's boundary wall. Raising a karate chop towards the other figure at the top of the pole, she had asked while glaring sharp:

"Where art thou from, ninja?"

"Huh... Huhhhh?"

"Thou art scouting this residence, but 'tis too obvious. Thou hast climbed the wrong tree, 'tis extremely conspicuous. Thou art probably a ninja in training, but this Muramasa doth not show mercy to the enemy—"

"Hey—! He works for the electrical company, okay—!?"

He remembered how he cried out in panic while looking up at the fluttering kimono.

But still, now that she had pointed it out, a handy man dressed all over in navy-blue workclothes, leaning against the top of the utility pole, really did look a bit like a ninja.

There was also one time when he heard a strange noise after returning home from shopping.

A very clumsy but also very familiar noise—pu-pii!

"..."

He tiptoed to his own room and pulled the sliding door open with a clack. She looked back, startled. She could not possibly have failed to sense his presence, but perhaps she was really focusing hard on something.

Sitting on the tatami floor, she was holding the recorder he used for music class.

"B-Brat, do not misunderstand! I am simply very bored, trying to find something amusing, so I chanced upon hither room and discovered this thng. I am not interested, well... Ultimately, 'tis because I have never seen this type of flute before!"

"Don't go entering other people's rooms without asking. Anyway, never mind."

She looked a little red in the cheeks. Turning her face away, she handed the recorder to him. Only glancing sideways at him, she said:

"However, brat, since thou left this on the desk, it implieth that thou intendest to practice next?"

"Yeah, there's a test tomorrow."

"Then play it Practice is very important. I shall watch thee practice, how now?"

"Oh—You want to know how it's played?"

"C-Certainly not! 'Tis out of my perfect consideration, to prevent thee from failing in front of others, wanting thee to feel used to an audience's gaze, nothing more... Very well, first demonstrate which finger presses where!"

"Jeez. I'm still not very good at playing this, you know?"

After taking the recorder, he suddenly realized in surprise now.

The recorder's mouthpiece. Just now, she had placed the recorder's mouthpiece between her lips. It felt a little moist somehow. As soon as he became aware of this, his heart suddenly pounded hard uncontrollably.

(This... Wouldn't this be what they call... an indirect—)

"How now?"

"N-Nothing! Nothing at all!"

It would not count if he wiped it. Reset, reset. Indeed, there was absolutely no need to feel concerned or bothered—Thinking that to himself, he used his clothing to wipe the recorder nonchalantly then brought the mouthpiece to his lips. Under her gaze, he began to play the prescribed melody.

He found it difficult to get the beat right because his heart was still pounding very noisily.

Apparently out of certain considerations, his father had reminded her to avoid walking outside as much as possible. Hence, she essentially spent her time at home either eating or sleeping, frequently looking exceedingly bored. Although she seemed to enjoy period dramas shown on television, period dramas were not available twenty-four hours a day.

In the end, his daily task could also be said to be serving as her playmate to kill time. Or rather, toy might be more accurate.

There were many memories. While he was jumping rope, she watched from the veranda. Perhaps wanting to try it as well, she joined in the rope jumping soon after. But because the rope's length was meant for a child, she jumped very awkwardly. Even after he told her "too short, it's not gonna work," she still continued to jump angrily. She was able to make bamboo-copters with a single finger. When looking up towards the rotor spinning in the sky, her eyes looked like they were staring far off into the distance. Apart from that, there were many many memories to reminisce about.

Indeed. From his perspective, she was definitely not an existence of legend.

Although when she first arrived at his home, she was merely an ordinary stranger.

But before he knew it, she had become simply a certain person who existed there.

Like his father, she had become a certain person in his home without any sense of dissonance.

In other words, inside his heart, she was simply—

Part 5

After returning to her own home, Kirika collapsed on the sofa.

Her chest felt painful as though someone was constricting her tightly. Still lying on the sofa, she removed her clothing, entering a state which she considered fully nude, but the constricting feeling did not go away at all. This applied in two separate senses.

There was the scene she had witnessed at Lilyhowell's lair earlier. She recalled how his face smiled while he was recounting Konoha's past. No, starting from that point, she was already unable to dispel the image from her mind. This matter was constricting her chest tightly in a manner that even a cursed bondage suit could not compare.

Those bonds were too powerful. Seeing him reminisce with that kind of look on his face, she could not help but come to this conclusion.

(That's right... Past memories are very powerful. A weight built up and protected by the long passage of time, impossible to topple overnight. I'm so jealous...)

However—A certain person was murmuring quietly in the bottom of her heart. Both ugly and irritating, the one whispering was her other self that she absolutely refused to acknowledge.

But Konoha was no longer here. He was simply using past memories to forcibly fill in the void left behind by what was lost.

That void. If he truly lost things for real, a massive hole would result there, right?

Forced to admit the weight of reminiscences, it also implied the greatness of the void resulting after loss. Taking advantage of this void would be exceedingly simple...

(Shut up.)

You don't have any shared memories built up over many years. Impossible to oppose her at all. Seizing the void after Konoha's disappearance, surely this was the only and guaranteed method—

"—Shut up!"

She suddenly glared with her eyes widened and used her entire body's strength to hammer the table next to the sofa, hammering so hard that she was almost breaking the bones in her hand. Of course, her bones did break in actual fact. Acute pain was transmitted from her fist, the numbing kind akin to experiencing an electrical current. She was the one feeling this pain. Absolutely not the depraved villain lurking in the thick and filthy mud in the depths of her heart. Hence, relying on this pain, Kirika awakened her thoughts.

Then she expressed agreement.

I know. You have a point.

Suppose there really existed a means for her to win, it could only happen by seizing the void left behind by her rival. Only by seizing the advantageous position generated by that void after her rival dropped out. This was the realistic method with the highest chances of victory—

(That's right. So realistic it's absolutely ridiculous...)

But precisely because of that, she could not choose such means.

Slowly getting up, Kirika sat up properly on the sofa this time. Her pale white body. The black bondage suit covering it. The bones sticking out in sight because of the fracturing impacts. The injured and bleeding fist. Simply by resting the fist on her thigh and staring at it, she could see it healing slowly. What a repulsive scene.

However, thanks to this scene, she was able to seriously recall the forgotten truth after so long.

Both matter-of-fact and important, it was the truth that absolutely must not be glossed over.

(This is myself.)

No matter how repulsive, this was still the greatest component of her being. Question: What kind of existence is Ueno Kirika? Answer: This kind of existence. What else could be said?

Having remembered this fact, she ought to go further and recall another.

She had confessed her feelings to him only because she intended to squarely confront the curse enveloping her, to confront her cursed destiny.

Having prepared herself for absolute defeat—Even if defeated, she firmly believed that this defeat would be precisely the refreshing result to seal away her cursed way of life.

Dreaming of a legitimate victory's possibility—She firmly believed this was what truly held value.

Hence she had confessed.

But this was not the current situation. It was equivalent to facing the back of a challenge she ought to confront head on. Could she simply stab the enemy in the back and survive in shame?

"The answer... is obvious, right...?"

Murmuring softly like this, Kirika clenched the fist that was squirming and recovering in a disgusting manner.

That would be stealing. The devil's whispers, disrespecting and wasting her initial resolve. Although it seemed quite attractive for the moment, she would eventually feel unable to forgive herself. The feelings of despise for her cursed self were probably never going to disappear.

She had forgotten something important.

After confessing, because she had not been rejected immediately, the illusion of hope had sprung up. Her eyes were mesmerized by the treasure that seemed even easier to reach than imagined. Like a despicable thief.

"But... I am not a thief."

She wanted to become a warrior, someone who could take defeat in stride while holding her head high. Not a cowardly victor. She had forgotten this fact.

Turning her gaze to the fist that had recovered its original form, Kirika stood up from the sofa. Ignoring the clothing she had casually thrown off the sofa, she went to the changing area directly.

In order to infuse vitality into her listless brain, she washed her face with cold water. As though beating herself up, she washed many times.

"Phew..."

She looked up. Before her eyes were her thoroughly wet bangs and face, the weird bondage suit on her body, the cursed acts of perversion she could not escape, the Ueno Kirika who deeply loved the boy named Yachi Haruaki. In other words, herself.

In the end—She discovered it. Kirika grinned at the mirror.

"...My confession has not ended yet. Until that guy gives me an answer, it's still in progress..."

Hence, in order to obtain his reply, everything necessary to undertake...

In other words, the matter of retrieving the girl named Konoha—

Surely, all of it counted as part of her confession.

Without doing that, her confession to him would not be complete.

"...How troubling, I really am an incurable masochist."

I knew it long ago, although it's truly absolutely ridiculous—Herself in the mirror was also smiling wryly.

Hence, the next day at Lilyhowell's lair—

Having remembered already, in order to complete her confession, she could only devote her mind and body fully to doing everything within her ability.

"Yachi, I have decided. Konoha-kun must be rescued no matter what. Uh, if I put it this way, you might think that I haven't been serious in wanting to save her until now, but it's not like that. Let me think—in other words, my level of seriousness increased. I guess I should say that I've come to a realization about the situation and also seen clearly what I ought to do..."

Despite showing a slightly lost and confused look on his face, Haruaki still answered:

"Well—Yes, thank you, Class Rep. I really appreciate it."

"I've already decided that I'm willing to do anything so long as it's within my ability. I'm willing to do anything... So..."

Kirika turned herself to face Lilyhowell squarely.

"If it could increase the power of your Wathes, thereby slightly raising this battle plan's chances of success, I intend to assist you."

"Meaning?"

"I remember there's one called the slaughtering blade «My Bloody Valentine»? The tool you were planning to use on that couple. Just by chopping human flesh, the blade becomes sharper, right?"

"Hold on, Class Rep, you're...!"

Haruaki and the others entered a commotion. Kirika held up her palm towards them to stop them from speaking.

Certain things could only be done by someone like her whose wounds would heal. Perhaps he might say "there's no need to go that far," but she believed that it was insufficient compensation unless she did this at least. Compensation for what she had been harboring subconsciously in her heart until now, the most despicable and worst hesitation.

Lilyhowell and her continued to stare at each other intently.

"The plan's main focus has shifted towards Yachi Haruaki and the «Poison Ritter». Apart from that, one, «My Bloody Valentine» is not related to any particular legend but was simply owned by a homicidal medieval merchant. Two, meanwhile, in contrast, Wathes such as Muramasa and Kotetsu are extremely high-level. No matter how much «My Bloody Valentine»'s sharpness is augmented, it will never be able to slice through Muramasa or Kotetsu's blade, most likely."

"But it is probably not meaningless."

"..."

Lilyhowell exhaled as though in exasperation. At the same time, she could be seen closing her eyes. Kirika also closed her eyes as well. She could imagine what was about to happen. Next, Kirika opened her eyes after a breath—

"Guh!"

Severed at the wrist, her left hand fell on the floor. Although she had already prepared herself, she still knelt down on the spot from pain. Standing next to her, Lilyhowell spoke while re-sheathing the slaughtering blade she had just swung:

"Before coming here, I had already strengthened this blade to a certain level. With this, it is probably strengthened to its limit. Even if I wanted to strengthen the curse-granted abilities of the «Calamitous Sword of Sigarsholm», none of you will feel terror. Hence, as it stands currently, you have already exhausted everything in your ability to strengthen the power of the Wathes in my possession."

"Is... that so...?"

"Kirika! Lilyhowell, you bitch! Even if Kirika requested it herself...!"

"It's okay, Fear-kun. This is how things should be. Fufu, looks like I'm overflowing with motivation..."

"Kirika...?"

Kirika smiled while breaking out in cold sweat as a biological reaction. Fear gazed down at her with puzzled eyes as though looking at something incomprehensible. Kirika believed this could not be helped either. This resolve, this self-imposed punishment relying on Lilyhowell, it was enough for her to endure it alone.

"Class Rep..."

"Yachi, don't say anything. I did this willingly. I have my own circumstances too."

"Okay... I don't quite get it, but... Anyway, Kuroe, I'm counting on you."

"Yeah, then I'll use a skill similar to repeated casting of auto-healing magic so you can rest assured during every round."

Kirika picked up her left hand and connected the severed wrist. Using hair that had the ability to increase healing, Kuroe wrapped up Kirika's left arm. Just by waiting quietly for a while, it was going to reattach successfully.

"Kuroe-kun, after my hand heals, let's think seriously together how to cooperate and restrain enemies. Practicing with a goal should probably work better than doing our own thing separately."

Kuroe widened her eyes slightly and said:

"What astonishing motivation, it's like you're a totally different person from yesterday."

Part 6

Using the current weapon—a cursed saber—she chopped mercilessly without holding back. Almost caught by a tiger-clawed strike, she swiftly changed trajectories and attacked from a different angle—In the next second, the other tiger-clawed hand swung with a whoosh. After bending down to dodge it, she retreated.

This curly-haired girl... correction, boy. Behind him, the partner could be seen with ghostlights glowing, constantly changing her position in a bewildering manner, shooting at high speed persistently.

"«Polter»—«Geist»!"

"Haha, such amusing skills!"

Facing off as her partner's opponent, she was moving back and forth even faster than the partner, using agile movements to dodge all the attacks of the strengthened brooms, bricks and other objects flying from various directions. As though this was a game of evasion.

Attention must not be focused over there. Using the saber to block a tiger-clawed strike, she bided her time before attacking again. The opponent blocked while retreating, then for merely an instant, he brushed past her who was currently dodging the partner's projectiles, almost close enough to be standing back to back.

"Would you like to swap?"

"Excellent suggestion. I was getting bored."

As though reaching complete understanding with just this exchange, they turned around at the same time, suddenly changing the directions they were advancing and the rhythm of their movements, with perfect coordination, each running opposite to the direction they had been facing.

The boy who was originally fighting her used a tiger claw to strike down an incoming brick. Without dodging at all, he dashed straight towards the projectile's source. Originally in the process of shooting while jumping, her partner frantically took up a broom for melee combat, but was too slow. A vicious strike sent her falling to the ground together with the broom.

A figure resembling a running beast was attacking her. Unlike the previous confrontation, her current aura carried another level of sharpness and

savagery. But she was not going to lose in speed. Thrusting the saber to intercept—

"Hmm, speed is quite fast, but the body's strength is lacking... Also, the cheap weapon is ultimately to blame."

"!"

Without using a particular move, simply using a sword's sharpness, the karate chop sliced through her saber's blade at its base. Frantically, she drew out the dagger she had prepared in her waist pouch, but it was too late. Despite barely dodging the spinning kick that followed, she was unable to block the axe kick that reached out immediately. Suffering a violent impact on her shoulder, she could not help falling over. The only reason she did not feel like she was cut by a sword was because the opponent was already convinced of victory. By the time she regained her senses, that woman was kneeling next to her face, running an index finger along her cheek, meanwhile making a slightly lewd expression and saying:

"Well then, adorable little lass, anything to say?"

She turned her head slightly to see that on the other side, her partner's arms were pinned down firmly by the sides of her head, held to the ground by the curly-haired boy who was sitting astride her. One could not tell from appearances alone, but considering the fact that they were of opposite gender, that kind of posture was not quite appropriate.

In any case—What she needed to say was that, naturally:

"S-Surrender."

"Very well, the match is over."

Hearing that from the person who had been observing the fight from the sidelines, she straightened her knees and stood up. Then bowing her head to look at her, still with a beast-like expression, she grinned and said:

"Hmm, for the purpose of killing time and exercising the body, the two of ye are very good opponents."

She had seen this woman before, yet she was also meeting her for the very first time.

Perhaps this could be considered a second defeat at her hands.

Sure enough, Satsuko was too weak and needed much more training—Ontenzaki Satsuko sighed deeply.

Part 7

Several days had already passed since the decision to join forces with Lilyhowell. Heading over to her lair each day at dawn, Haruaki practiced swinging the longsword while Kirika and Kuroe worked hard towards improving the level of their restraining techniques. Then they went home at sundown... This was repeated as a daily cycle. Preparations were carried out gradually without impediment.

However, Fear could not help but think—the preparations were forced to carry out.

She had a strong feeling that something important was being overlooked.

Rescuing Cow Tits—This reason was very legitimate. Working hard towards this was also a good thing. However, she still felt—Was their vision too narrow?

Sitting on the concrete floor, Fear glanced at her companions. Kirika and Kuroe were looking at the movements of each other's «Tragic Black River» and hair, saying things like "after this, that side needs to be reinforced." Until earlier, Fear had been practicing with them, serving as the restraint target, but later said "I'm a bit tired" and was now resting.

Fear did not quite know what Kuroe was thinking about. On the other hand, Kirika's vibe had changed completely several days earlier. Then there was that guy, who was stuck in tunnel vision from the start.

"Take that!"

"You are putting too much force in the swing. You need to make use of the sword's own weight."

"I know...!"

Haruaki was currently practicing swings using the white sword—called «Alius», right?—training how to deliver a blow to the enemy. Naturally, his training partner was Lilyhowell, who was currently blocking attacks using a metal pipe she had picked up.

Haruaki repeated the monotonous training again and again. Even when panting heavily, his shoulders heaving violently up and down, large sweat drops appearing on his forehead, he still kept staring ahead, spurring his arms and legs into action. Those eyes were definitely staring at a certain someone further ahead rather than Lilyhowell.

Haruaki charged forward. Acting as the target, Lilyhowell lightly lifted the tip of the metal pipe she was holding at a lower position. Colliding with Haruaki's sword—

(Ah!)

That alone was enough to make him lose balance and fall on the floor. Were his legs out of strength?

"...Rest first—"

"Not yet. This is nothing... And I think I finally get the trick. One more time!"

Interrupting Lilyhowell, Haruaki stood up again, raising his sword while staring vigorously. Soaked with sweat, his shirt was transparent. He was covered from head to foot by dirt from the abandoned site. Probably due to the fall just now, Fear could see scrapes near the elbow area. But of course, Haruaki was not going to let that bother him. Yelling out, he attacked Lilyhowell again. As though saying "no other choice," she blocked the incoming sword—

(That great big idiot...)

This was probably beyond tunnel vision now. Judging from his condition, it was blind faith and fanatic zeal.

Haruaki was thoroughly possessed by the goal of rescuing Konoha.

(Damn it. This is very dangerous...)

The danger was not limited to right now. He intended to stand on the battlefield in his current state. Swinging a long sword in real life, engaging in a deathmatch with the enemy in order to save Konoha.

Was Haruaki going to say this on the battlefield as well? Staring ahead, saying "this is nothing."

Even with an arm chopped off, a leg chopped off, was he going to say "this is nothing"?

Imagining that scene, Fear could not help but shudder.

Had no one realized? No one thought about it? Was she the only one who felt a sense of realism in such imaginings?

Fear felt a kind of coldness wrap around her entire body. This was undoubtedly terror. And to alleviate this sense of terror, her only choice was to discern clearly the reason for it.

Hence, she stared intently. She admitted the possibility of what lay deep in her heart.

—At this rate, Haruaki could lose his life.

She believed that the chances of it not happening were higher. Besides, this was something that was absolutely forbidden to happen, but it was undeniable that Haruaki dying would be the a possible worst case scenario. Even a god would be unable to deny it.

This sort of thing was absolutely forbidden from happening. Fear realized.

Just as Haruaki wanted to save Konoha, just as Lilyhowell wanted to avenge her comrades—in her own heart, it was fine as long as she could do that. The resolve willing to do this no matter what—This was the absolute goal of hers.

(Then... What should I do...?)

If she was willing to do anything...

Then for that absolute goal, what was the best courses of action she was supposed to follow, what was it—?

On the way home at night, Kirika suddenly found Fear pulling her at her sleeve. Seeing Fear slow down, she did the same to accommodate her. Without noticing them, Haruaki and Kuroe were walking not far ahead.

"...Kirika, I've something to ask you."

"What is it?"

Fear's voice was almost a whisper, probably because she did not want the two people ahead to overhear. Hence, Kirika answered quietly as well. Still facing forward, Fear's expression could not be seen clearly, obscured by the hair on the sides of her face.

"Kirika, why—are you helping Haruaki?"

"You're asking me why...? To rescue Konoha-kun. Isn't that obvious?"

"I understand that. But I don't get why you're willing to go so far as to get cut up for that girl and participating actively."

I guess I'll answer honestly, Kirika thought.

"I have my own reasons. Because there's a question that won't get a proper answer unless Konoha-kun is present. If she doesn't return, I'll feel very troubled."

The proper answer. The answer she wanted to know—The unknown that needed to be elucidated? How troubling. Truly absolutely ridiculous.

"That's why you're trying your hardest to help Haruaki?"

"Yes, because the goals we must achieve are aligned."

She could hear Fear slowly inhale. Then she spoke very calmly:

"—You don't care even if Haruaki will kill someone?"

Kirika almost stopped walking. However, this was something she already considered a long time ago. It was also something that Lilyhowell had not mentioned. It was a possible result on the road towards getting Konoha back.

"Even if that poison sword has that kind of effect..."

Pausing for a moment, Kirika continued:

"Yachi won't kill her... We are the ones doing it."

"That's just sophistry."

"Perhaps."

Kirika admitted honestly then noticed that Fear was no longer by her side. She looked back—

"That's also one way of thinking about it. But even so, it's still different from my view."

Fear halted. With her head bowed slightly, her expression was still obscured behind her hair.

Then even more quietly than before, her lips simply murmured.

"It never comes as a surprise when those who kill ended up getting killed, no matter when it happens. That's the truth of the world... It needs resolve... that perhaps... counts as a kind of curse. By the way, that guy shouldn't be standing in that kind of position in the first place..."

"Fear-kun...?"

Kirika also stopped. Just as she wanted to approach Fear, Fear suddenly raised her hand to stop her. Then Fear looked up. At the same time, the two people ahead also seemed to notice them and looked back to ask:

"Ficchi, what's the matter?"

Fear answered in a normal voice:

"I just remembered that we're out of rice crackers. I'll drop by the supermarket along the way to restock rice crackers before going home. Is there anything else you want me to buy?"

"Oh, then could you buy some eggs and milk? Say, why don't I go with you?"

"Dummy~ You're already exhausted, right? Hurry up and get home for a bath. See you later!"

Fear waved her hand forcefully then turned around and ran.

The only one tilting her head in puzzlement was Kirika who had been talking to her earlier. Haruaki and Kuroe completely failed to notice the unusual way Fear had been acting all this time.

Because when Fear looked up, the expression on her face showed—

As though all darkness had been swept aside, an incredibly dream-like smile filled with transparency.

Part 8

"...Ha~! Fufu, having sake under the moon, 'tis delicious!"

"I agree. This is what could be called refinement... Hmm."

"Oh, so master can drink too. Indeed, warriors ought to drink with capacities akin to rivers and seas. 'Twould be utterly shameful if a general could not hold his liquor."

"If I had to add to that—Alcohol is also a type of drug."

"Hmm. Curses with those conditions also exist?"

Regardless, there was no problem as long as the sake tasted good—She tilted the sake cup to drink. Floating on the water surface in front of her was a tray carrying a flask of sake. However, this was not a hot spring. Instead of a therapeutic hot spring, their bodies were simply immersed in ordinary warm water. Rather than rocks arranged to form a pool, their backs were leaning against a soft, inflatable object filled with air.

Currently, Muramasa and Nirushaaki were having a dip in a large plastic swimming pool in the garden.

"Although this is like a bath and not actually a hot spring, it still has that kind of feel to it. This feels very comfortable too. Despite being a moment's whim, the preparations were not wasted at all. Hahaha!"

"But Kotetsu is apparently quite opposed to it."

"Because he cares too much about common sense in strange areas."

She recalled how Kotetsu reluctantly gone off to buy sake and this plastic swimming pool, meanwhile grumbling: "Warriors bathing together is too improper, I must decline firmly, forgive my inability to assist... But if it is in the form of dabbling in water, it would be barely acceptable..." Finding the sake flask empty, she waved the flask and yelled:

"Hey~ Kotetsu~ The sake is out. Prepare another flask then hurry thyself over too."

"Ugh... Why must I dress in this manner..."

Carrying a tray with the refilled flask, Kotetsu walked out of the mansion awkwardly—He was wearing a white swimsuit, fairly tight-fitting and what was commonly dubbed the "school swimsuit."

"Didst thou not say? Were it dabbling in the water in the style of sake drinking in a hot spring under the moon, thou art willing to pour sake or do other tasks. A man's word ought to be kept, yes?"

"I did—say that. Uh, but this look..."

Kotetsu held the tray slightly further down, speaking while furtively hiding his lower body. Squeezing his knees together, he was rubbing his thighs awkwardly in embarrassment.

"And while dabbling in the water, things called swimsuits must be worn? I was feeling apologetic about asking thee to serve on thy own, hence I bought this swimsuit after carefully selecting. Thou art definitely wearing it, very good, very good."

At this moment, Kotetsu suddenly stared wide-eyed, blushing with red cheeks, probably because he noticed the situation.

"Ah! M-Muramasa-sama, why have you taken off your swimsuit!? I am only assisting this dabbling in the water because you are also wearing a swimsuit, Muramasa-sama—"

"Due to excessive motion, it fell off on its own accord. See, there it lieth on the bottom. 'Tis not because wearing this thing doth not improve the mood for sake drinking under the moon."

Picking up the triangular piece of fabric with her foot, she raised it up deliberately to show Kotetsu. Kotetsu's face went even more fiery red. Thinking that a skimpier swimsuit would feel more like having a bath, she had chosen one with an extremely small area in fabric—A swimsuit called the bikini? But ultimately, it lost to the temptation of not wearing any.

"By the way, why are you doing the same, Nirushaaki-sama!?"

"I am definitely wearing it down there."

"Please wear the top as well!"

Nirushaaki was calmly finishing off the remaining sake in her cup. She also believed that Kotetsu was being too uptight.

"What a nagging fellow... Okay, bring the sake over."

"Yes. But truth be told, I am a man. Under such conditions, I am truly unable to assist the two of you any further. For the remaining sake, please take care of it yourself..."

Muramasa turned to the side and took the tray from Kotetsu as he declared. However, she did not set down the tray to float on the water.

Kotetsu did not seem concerned about this—thus indicating his slight lack of attention.

"Haha, that is such a small-minded thing to say! Since thou darest to oppose me, thou must be punished—!"

"H-Hyaehhhhhh!"



Holding the tray in one hand, she used her other hand to grab Kotetsu's arm, dragging him forcibly into the pool. Splash! A massive spray of water everywhere. The warm water in the cramped pool instantly became turbulent. Probably expecting this scene already, Nirushaaki calmly picked up the new sake flask from the tray Muramasa was holding and poured sake into her cup. Truly composed at all times, the way as befitted the master.

"Hwap! Munyuu... M-Muramasa-sama?"

"Now now, stay still. This pool is very small."

Finally managing to escape from her bosom, Kotetsu slipped and took a great fall.

"In that case, you shouldn't have pulled me in... Muffle!"

"Kotetsu, even if you intend to speak to my bosom, I cannot hear anything at all."

"On this rare occasion, 'tis mine intention of benevolence that wisheth to let thee enjoy the taste of sake under the moon... Dost thou intend to trample over mine intentions of benevolence? Hmm?"

"Th-That... Umm—A-Anyway, please... put on your swimsuits first! At this rate... truth be told... I..."

"How stubborn. Then it cannot be helped, thou shalt help me put it on. Because mine arms are occupied in holding the sake and the tray. Come, I am counting on thee."

Once again, she picked up her swimsuit with her toes and raised it above the water. With his face as red as boiled shrimp, Kotetsu frantically shook his head. Nirushaaki looked up at the moon on her own while drinking Japanese sake—

Existing right there, visible right there, was a scene that looked quite delightful.

Neither causing any trouble for others...

Nor harming anyone.

For them, this was truly a delightful "everyday" scene.

—However, in spite of that, nevertheless...

"That's... fake."

Sensing the trio in the pool narrow their eyes suddenly to look over in her direction...

Fear silently emerged from the darkness, all alone by herself.

Part 9

Kotetsu quietly made his way out of the swimming pool. Reaching out to the side, ignoring her wet body, Nirushaaki put on the American Indian shirt. Still soaked in the water, Konoha licked a sip of sake in her cup with amusement.

"All alone by thyself, what art thou doing?"

"Haruaki—He looks like he's suffering a lot."

Fear took a step forward.

Recalling the way he looked until just earlier, she answered.

"THat guy's been looking forward single-mindedly. Painfully, with suffering, but he's virtually ignoring all of it. On the other hand... You're looking really happy. Forgotten everything, you look really happy."

They did not give any response, simply staring at her. Warily, unemotionally, as though watching a good show.

"Hmm, why is that? Clearly these two matters... have nothing to do with me."

Fear took out her Rubik's cube and gripped it hard.

"But watching from the side... it's very painful for me."

Looking up, she gazed ahead.

"I don't understand why, but it's really painful!"

Then she sprinted.

She transformed the Rubik's cube to become her emulated form. An ugly hatchet of execution.

There were no thoughts in her mind about movements or targets at all. She simply sprinted madly. Sprinting, sprinting, sprinting, sprinting, she then did what she was supposed to do. Her body knew what this was. Hence there was no need to think.

Causing splashes, Konoha jumped up from the pool. Water droplets glistened and sparkled. Because she was excessively conspicuous, Fear's body naturally deemed her as the target on its own. Fear swung the hatchet with full force. Blocked. She could see Kotetsu transforming into a sword, held in Nirushaaki's hand. Rather than strange mask, Nirushaaki was still wearing glasses, but was dressed in that shirt. So what? After being blocked, Fear changed directions immediately and attacked Nirushaaki, clashing with Kotetsu's heavy blade. Instantly, she was kicked flying from behind by someone. Her flank felt intense pain. Was she cut?

"Damn it, accursed... Cow Tits..."

"Thou still insistest on addressing me in that fashion?"

Fear stood up, sprinted, then knocked down, stood up again—This kept repeating. At the same time, staring intently at her, Fear wondered:

By the way... What exactly is this girl to me?

In her own heart, how did she view this existence known as Muramasa Konoha?

The girl who already existed when she first moved into the Yachi home. A girl quite intimate with Haruaki. A girl who liked meat. An eyesore of a physique. Totally incompatible. An annoying presence. Very nagging. Quite meddlesome sometimes. Glasses. Her senior in that home? A classmate at school. A cursed sword. Something that had killed countless humans to this date, just like her.

Ahhh, I don't get it. Is she an enemy? Or a friend?

With her around, what will happen to me?

If she were not around, then what—?

"..."

For who knew how many seconds, minutes or even dozens of minutes, Fear kept mulling over this same matter.

In other words, one against three—She allowed her body to move nonstop on its own, fighting persistently.

By the time she regained her senses, she found her view to be showing the same image as initially. Namely, the face of the one who had forgotten her.

But apart from that, only the background had changed.

Behind Konoha's head which was bowing to gaze down at her—
The beautiful moon was clear and bright.

Without realizing it, she was already collapsed on the ground, looking up at the sky.

Like a certain previous time, Konoha was stepping on her arms, still maintaining a posture that would allow her to chop Fear into two any time she wanted. Right in front of Fear's eyes was also her knifehand. Likewise, that knifehand could at any time put an end to the movements of someone insignificant like her.

Konoha grumbled in a slightly aghast voice:

"What art thou thinking? Clearly thou knowest thou cannot prevail against the three of us."

"...I know, right?"

Fear admitted with a strangely straightforward mood.

Because she—definitely...

Wanted very much to end all this immediately.

To an unbearable extent. To the point where she did not want anything apart from that.

Anything was fine. Any kind of ending did not matter. Anyway, she just wanted an end to all this.

With that—at least she would no longer need to see Haruaki stepping onto the battlefield.

But this body that was moving on its own, what exactly was it seeking?
What did it want to do?

It wanted to kill Nirushaaki? It wanted to kill Kotetsu? Or—

But there was no meaning in pondering these matters further.

"Hmm, whatever I have tired of playing with thee. If thou comest again alone by thyself again, 'twould be nothing more than an affront to the eyes... 'Tis time to conclude, yes?"

Without needing to look, Fear knew what was going to happen next. As the knifehand descended swiftly and fluently, Fear lightly closed her eyes.

To think she would be killed by Cow Tits, what a strange feeling, she thought.

Chapter 5 - The Future Known as Tomorrow; Its Anticipation / "The blade - It's too sharp."

Part 1

While sipping black tea, Ontenzaki Satsuko spaced out and recalled what had happened several days earlier. She sighed.

"What's the matter?"

"Satsuko is currently reminiscing and reflecting. Satsuko is really so weak that Satsuko must work even harder..."

Although someone answered, the person who posed the question could not be seen. More precisely, everything in sight was part of the person who posed the question. Because Satsuko was currently drinking tea inside her body, the cursed house.

Several days earlier, Satsuko and Fourteen were summoned by the reason "because you two are nearby" and forced to serve as training partners. Perhaps to the other side, this was merely entertainment to prevent their bodies from going sluggish from inactivity, but for Satsuko and Fourteen who were on an inferior level, it was valuable combat experience. Satsuko had pulled out her true skills as much as possible, but still—

"It can't be helped. Preparations were not enough because we were called over at short notice. I was almost running out of ammunition towards the latter half while things would be definitely different for you, Satsuko, if even more powerful weapons could be prepared."

"But it's not like that kind of super strong top-level Wathe can be obtained that easily! Satsuko doesn't want to blame tools for an excuse~ In the end, it boils down to the issue of ability, ability! But if you ask whether Satsuko's level of combat skills are enough to match them... Satsuko will be very depressed... Ah, match? N-No, this isn't a lame pun, Fourt!"

"I didn't say anything. Perhaps I'm biased in favoring my partner to say this, but in terms of technique, I don't think the difference is large enough for you to have such an inferiority complex. If there really is a difference, it consists of experience as well as the 'level' of weaponry after all. Let me repeat myself. In the end, you can only explain everything with the difference in weapons. Because the opponents are precisely the kind of legendary Wathe you're talking about. This is the undeniable truth."

"Fair... enough. Especially «Muramasa»—"

Satsuko thought back. Muramasa's face was the same as during past encounters but her eyes were completely different. A beast's savagery, a warrior's dignity, a demon's insanity, a sword's beauty... Vigorous and strong eyes that seemed to harbor all these qualities.

After the sparring, Satsuko had chatted with her for a while but she seemed to have forgotten Satsuko completely. In other words, total memory loss. Existing now was the her that was connected directly to the past.

Thinking to herself, Satsuko wondered if that past was precisely the source of Muramasa's strength. The strength of a Wathe that had experienced warring eras and actual battles. The strength from knowing combat deeply and knowing deeply what battlefields were exactly.

Satsuko suddenly felt curious and asked Fourteen:

"That Muramasa-san and Fear-san, who's stronger?"

"In my view, that Muramasa is the pinnacle of weapons. She epitomizes the concept of the pure and sharp weapon. Even if Fear-in-Cube is the most cursed tool among cursed tools, her very essence is still that of the tool of torture and execution. Hence—"

Most simply, as though this was perfectly logical, Fourteen gave her opinion:

"In a battle between those two, without absolutely any doubt—Fear-in-Cube will be destroyed."

Part 2

Hence, the only way Fear could survive was by not fighting anymore.

In hindsight, this was made possible by others. In order to rescue her from the logical result, they took logical countermeasures.

"Mode: «Mongolian Death Worm Yoshikado»!"

"Oh, what now? Some kind of ground worm?"

The moon overhead was shrouded in shadows. A certain creepy black entity was spewing large amounts of soil in Fear's surroundings, squirming while emerging upright from underground.

Perhaps even Konoha could not help but feel astonished. Stopping the movement of her knifehand, she looked around. The force of restraint from her feet stepping on Fear's arms lessened slightly. Instantly, Fear felt something wrap around her body followed by a sense of suspension. Then being pulled backwards. The conversation taking place at her original location became more and more distant.

"Orders, may I ask?"

"I do not believe there is any need to chase after them. Leave them be."

"Running here one instant, fleeing the next, how busy of them. Oh my, time for another drink..."

Even though the conversation moved out of earshot, Fear still found herself continuing to be dragged backwards. Dragged backwards nonstop. Even after getting swallowed into the darkness of the night where nothing could be seen, the dragging still did not cease.

Then when Fear regained her senses, she found Kuroe's face before her eyes.

"Ficchi!"

In a rare moment, truly an extremely rare moment, Kuroe's eyes were filled with anger. The instant she saw that, for some reason, Fear felt the depths of her throat tighten all at once and could only answer in a demoralized, trembling voice.

"Hey... Kuroe, what... should I do...?"

Probably because the voice sounded so pathetic that even Fear herself was surprised...

The anger in Kuroe's eyes suddenly subsided.

"To be frank, just this time—Even I have no idea."

After murmuring softly, Kuroe used her short arms to hug Fear's head tightly.

Part 3

Thinking about the young master...

She discovered that he loved to run around all over the place, unafraid of curses, unafraid of her. It felt very refreshing.

At the same time, his eyes were sincere and forthright.

She could sense that his maturation was commendable. Since his father was quite undisciplined and arbitrary in doing whatever he wanted, she really did not feel that his education was commendable.

"What should we do about your name~?"

"As I have said, just use Muramasa."

"By itself, that won't be very convenient."

"Otherwise, how else should I be called? I, Muramasa, am Muramasa."

Unexpectedly, there were times when he was very insistent. He refused to give up despite her multiple rejections, always gazing straight at her while asking that inconsequential question.

Leaning forward over the table in the living room, he cocked his head adorably.

"I keep reminding you because it's inconvenient. Besides, you should also—How should I put this? Isn't it time you acknowledged me as master, right? Have you decided to lift your curse for real?"

She could not help but laugh. This child was still concerned about that kind of thing? Clearly she had not made any request of that sort from the start. She decided to gloss over the issue casually in a joking tone of voice.

"Ha. Not yet not yet. Because thou and I cannot be considered a true master-servant relationship."

"A true master-servant relationship?"

Pondering for some time, while recalling the valiant generals and soldiers who roamed the battlefields with her in the past, she said at the same time:

"Indeed. In a true master-servant relationship, there is no distinction between master and servant... Verily. The sword is the general, the

general is the sword. Spurring the horse, galloping across the battlefield together, annihilating enemies nonstop. Even our lives are one."

"?"

"In other words, 'tis entrusting each other's lives to the other. The type of trust allowing one to trust the other to guard their back, a mutual relationship where both put their lives on the line to protect each other's lives. In conclusion—'tis a relationship where bodies and minds are merged into one. Uniting two into one in all respects. Becoming the same existence with each other."

Of course, she knew this sort of thing was impossible. She was a cursed tool. This child could not have forgotten that. He could not possibly trust her wholeheartedly. Likewise, she could not trust him completely... Asking her to rely on a child like him, that was probably never going to happen.

He tilted his little head in the opposite direction to earlier, but immediately smiled radiantly and said:

"I don't quite get it, but... Okay! Basically I have to help you if there's danger! Of course, that's very normal!"

"Speak not of normal, that sort of thing cannot happen in the first place."

Hearing his overconfident words, she wanted to laugh instead. Scoffing sardonically, she deliberately continued in mockery:

"Ha, very well~ If thou helpest me, whether using thy life or anything else, I shall help thee in return. However much thou helpest me, I shall repay thee accordingly. This is the contract. Because a true master-servant relationship hath yet to exist between us, something on this level would be an achievement already."

He pouted slightly.

"But I really want to make it a true master-servant relationship... If it's possible to become that kind of existence, then our wishes will become one, and you'll work hard to lift your curse, right? How should I go about it?"

"Who knoweth. 'Tis not something that is done just because 'tis decided. Rather, it has already come into being by the time thou noticest."

"Eh~"

Listening to his dissatisfied protest—she thought at the same time: but...

If the other party believed that helping her was perfectly normal and also thought that trusting her was perfectly natural, then there was no issue but what lay in herself. It was simply her reluctance to get close to him, nothing more complicated than that. If she had to ponder why she was reluctant to get close to him, why she was unable to trust him wholeheartedly—

Putting down the teacup, she silently cast her gaze over the garden.

The quiet garden was dyed red by the setting sun.

It looked almost like the color of blood.

Perhaps it's that time, she thought.

Part 4

He had apparently fallen asleep. Inside the dark bedroom, Haruaki sat up blankly on the tatami floor. Moonlight was streaming into the room, causing Konoha's glasses on the desk to shine brightly. It was very quiet at home—After a bath, while he was thinking "I'd better prepare dinner," he had fallen asleep out of exhaustion. What were the others doing?

Perhaps too exhausted by training, his mental circuits still had not connected successfully with his body. Only his brain managed to start operating barely.

(This could very well be the first time in my life I've exercised my body the most...)

But speaking of exercising the body, Haruaki recalled Kirika several days earlier. He recalled how she had allowed part of her body to be chopped off for Lilyhowell's sake. He felt like he could see her resolve towards something. It felt as though she was saying that such resolve was necessary in order to go forward.

Did he have that kind of resolve? Haruaki asked himself introspectively.

(Of course.)

Of course, he had long noticed the ambiguity in his surroundings.

Lilyhowell had not explained the specifics of what was going to happen when he wounded Nirushaaki using the poisoned sword borrowed from her.

He could predict it. He was no fool.

The opponent might die if he used that poisoned sword. She could lose her life.

But even so...

He had a goal, a wish that he wanted to accomplish no matter what.

(If Konoha must be taken back like this...)

Lying on the tatami floor, he lightly lifted an arm which finally managed to move, raising it towards the moonlight.

He did not know if it was due to fatigue or some other reason—His arm was trembling.

"...Haha."

Hence, Haruaki realized concretely.

Extremely horrifying. So scary that he wanted to run away. A black shadow was crawling along his spine. His fingertips felt as though they were touching the asphalt that would trap him forever if he dipped his hand inside. Regarding this irreversibility, it felt like being entangled by a certain bottomless entity.

Ah, so this is what's meant by being cursed—?

Just as Haruaki clenched his trembling hand, a sound came from the front door. Forcing his body that was finally able to move to stand up, he walked over to the entrance.

Kuroe had returned with a bloody and filthy Fear.

"After you fell asleep, Haru, Kiririn called me and basically said that before she went home, she noticed Ficchi acting weird, so she's asking me what Ficchi's doing at the moment. Then I had a bad feeling because Ficchi still hadn't returned. I ran over to that place—And it was just as I feared."

By Kuroe's side, Fear simply kept her head hung. Simply from that, Haruaki seemed to realize what had happened to Fear and what kinds of feelings accompanied her actions.

He felt apologetic. At the same time, he found her very foolish.

Hence, Haruaki reached out lightly and stroked Fear's silver-haired head.

"Don't worry. I—won't die."

"..."

"That's why I'm also training in addition to the battle plan. I'm sure Konoha will recover soon. Maybe just by bringing her back to this home, her memories might recover all at once."

Haruaki deliberately spoke in cheerful tone of voice. Still not looking up, Fear said:

"...Hey."

"Hmm?"

"You're willing to go so far just to rescue Cow Tits, but what does that have to do with me? What do you think...?"

The answer was simple.

"Well, there's basically something this home can't do without. There's this combo. It just doesn't feel right until a certain duo shows up together. That said, my explanation is very vague. What about you, Kuroe?"

"Agreed~ Ficchi, if the two of you aren't present together, it feels like this family is nuso missing something important. No, is it nunyu instead...? Or soho...?"

"Hey, there's no need to worry about that nonsensical onomatopoeia, right?"

While the two of them were talking, the silver-haired head under Haruaki's palm shook slightly.

"Is this... really okay...?"

"There's nothing bad, right?"

He truly believed from the bottom of his heart. That duo simply existed here. It had started a long time ago. By this point, it would be possible to change—Absolutely.

"You're really great big idiots..."

Standing at the concrete entryway, Fear moved forward without taking off her shoes. Leaning her upper body slightly forward, she bumped her forehead against Haruaki's stomach.

Because he knew what she was seeking—

For quite a long while, substituting for words, Haruaki kept caressing her head gently.

Part 5

Meanwhile at the same time, Kirika was running.

After calling Kuroe and finding out that Fear still had not returned home, she had rushed frantically out of home—But before she reached Nirushaaki's location, Kuroe contacted her and said: "I've picked up Ficchi safely and on my way home now~" Nevertheless, feeling she would continue to worry if she just turned back to go home now, Kirika changed her destination to the Yachi home, deciding it would be best to check out the situation at least.

Jogging along streets at night, she finally arrived in front of the Yachi home's entrance—

"...?"

She brushed past a woman. Only after walking past each other did Kirika halt, struck with a sense of dissonance.

It was perfectly commonplace to walk past other people along streets at night. However, that woman had walked out from behind the utility pole in front of the Yachi home. As though she had been observing the interior situation until now, the woman had pulled her gaze away from the Yachi home to face forward. Then when passing by Kirika—as soon as she saw Kirika—the woman even smiled faintly.

Kirika looked back in surprise but the woman's figure had already vanished into the night.

"Who was that just now...?"

There was nothing unusual about the woman's face but Kirika felt she had seen it somewhere before. There was even an inexplicable sense of affectionate familiarity. However, this should be her first time seeing that woman. Kirika had no recollection of her appearance itself. Furthermore, regardless of appearance, the sense of presence the woman gave off was in itself a problem. A vibe of confidence, a vibe of someone extraordinary, as though she was roaming world and surviving on her own without depending on anyone—An aura of "strength."

Staring intently at the street at night where the woman had disappeared, Kirika narrowed her eyes. She could think of one possibility.

Then passing through the Yachi home's front gate, she walked towards the ajar entrance. Looking inside, she saw Fear and Kuroe just about to take off their shoes and enter the corridor. Haruaki was receiving them right there.

"Oh it's you, Class Rep."

"Oh~ Kiririn. Thank you for your call~"

"...Kirika."

Seeing Fear turn her gaze away in embarrassment, Kirika sighed. Fear was no longer showing the same expression Kirika had witnessed earlier before parting ways, that of the girl helplessly devoured by her own inner thoughts. This was probably due to that hand of his on Fear's head. At least it looked like Fear was not going to risk her life on her own again.

"How troubling... Absolutely ridiculous. But let's save the complaining for later. Fear-kun, go take a bath first to give your body a rest first. During this time, there are also things we need to do."

"Eh? Things we need to do?"

Seeing Haruaki make a puzzled look, Kirika explained what happened just now. The presence of the woman who seemed to be observing this home. The aura of an extraordinary person. On top of that—

"Nirushaaki said roughly a week, right? Tomorrow will be the sixth day. It's possible."

"Y-You're saying...!"

Presumably understanding what Kirika was implying, Haruaki's face suddenly went tense. Kirika nodded slowly before saying:

"Yes. Although it's slightly early—the time may have arrived already."

First they contacted Un Izoey to ask her to investigate if Nirushaaki's faction had shown any movements. Although Kirika was reluctant to approach them for favors, which felt like getting indebted to them, this was a time of emergency. Although it was unpleasant not knowing what the other side was thinking, at least Un Izoey would still act according to their demands. Finally, they were informed that Nirushaaki's side had not made any moves.

After asking Un Izoey and Mummy Maker to continue their surveillance, they then called Lilyhowell. After updating her on the situation—

'Let me clarify first. That woman is not the Draconian's Commander.'

"What are you talking about?"

Did they worry for nothing? This thought flashed across Kirika's mind. However—

'The current Commander is supposed to be male. But since that woman was intentionally observing the Yachi home's situation, there is an extremely high chance that she is related to this incident. One, the duel between the Commander and «Number Two» is a major event pertaining to the Draconians' future. Two, since the match's intent is to decide the stronger of the two, they will probably have the duel take place in a way arousing the least complaints as possible. That is all—in light of that, I conclude that it would not be surprising if one of the «High Singles» visited to serve as something like a "referee."'

"So that's the woman I saw?"

'Because a «High Single» of the Draconians would probably feel interested in your group. Perhaps she simply took the opportunity to check out the Yachi home's situation.'

"...Then what should we do next?"

'Just as a safety precaution, perhaps your home needs monitoring. But as I have mentioned just now, their duel is one that demands a fair match. I do not expect a late night fight where there will be many uncertain factors. It

will most likely take place during the daytime tomorrow. In other words, we must take action one step ahead—'

The cellphone was set on speakerphone. Listening to this conversation close by, Haruaki and the rest were showing serious eyes.

My eyes probably look similar, Kirika thought.

At the same time, they were listening to Lilyhowell's final statement that served to sum up the current situation:

'Our battle plan will be put into action early tomorrow morning. Rest and recover your energy properly before then.'

Part 6

Everything needed to be done was already done. Haruaki convinced himself.

Lilyhowell had mentioned at the end of the phone call that his sword swings were already looking decent compared to the beginning. Assuming the target was completely restrained, if all he had to do was deliver a strike to an arm or a leg as prescribed by the plan, he should be able to do it without any problems.

Hence, everything needed to be done was already done—However...

(...Is it really the case?)

Starting just earlier, he was unable to banish this thought. There were probably certain things that were needed as preparations for tomorrow, right? But he could not figure out what they were no matter how he racked his brain.

Then no more preparations needed to be done. Everything needed to be done was already done. What remained was recovering energy for tomorrow, in other words, just going to bed earlier—His brain knew very clearly but the depths of his heart felt inexplicably unsettled, preventing him from sleeping. Haruaki simply lay in bed, staring intently at the ceiling.

He turned his body with a rustle. The cellphone by the side of his pillow entered his view. He casually picked it up and scrolled through his contact list—

"..."

Haruaki stopped where "Konoha's cell" was displayed. Driven by impulse, he pressed dial and held the phone to his ear, closing his eyes. His heart pounded uncontrollably. "The number you have dialed is currently unavailable or has traveled outside of coverage area..." After making a sigh that resembled both relief and disappointment, he hung up. This had persisted all this time ever since Konoha went missing. A result that could not be more clear.

Haruaki absentmindedly scrolled through the contact list. Names of classmates. Names of friends. He was reminded that apart from his inner circle, there were also many people waiting for Konoha's return.

Un Izoey's name was outside the listing of Japanese kana. She and Amanda were still unwilling to join the fight. But this could not be helped, Haruaki thought. They had their own standpoint too.

The contact list also included names such as "Superintendent" and "Hyoujou Zenon-san." Haruaki had already explained the entire situation and the superintendent had expressed his willingness to do everything to help—However, they were ordinary people after all, despite knowing how to fight to some extent. This time, their enemy was stronger and more merciless than any previous foe. Too dangerous. Haruaki also did not want to see Konoha fighting Zenon or the other staff. Furthermore, although they had not met Nirushaaki before as former members of the Draconians, coming into contact could still give rise to many troubles—Based on these reasons. Haruaki did not want them to get involved.

This also applied to their friends such as Shiraho and Sovereignty or Chihaya and Isuzu. Although they were likely to refuse preemptively even before the request was made, this situation was way too dangerous. Irrevocable results could even arise.

However, suddenly, he wanted to hear other people's voices.

He could not help but press dial. The cellphone ringed for a long time. Just as he was about to give up and hang up—

'...'

"Oh... Hello, are you Shiraho? I'm sorry for calling you this late."

'Sigh—' An obvious sighing was transmitted from the other side.

'It finally arrived. Transcending rape by vision and rape by smell, now comes rape by phone call. How unbearable. When a pervert wishes for female contact, even the telecommunications company's signal towers can be used as sex toys, pervert.'

Still the same as usual—Haruaki smiled wryly.

'What's the matter?'

"Uh... Umm, we've been absent from classes lately, so I was a bit curious about the situation at school."

'Summed up in a word, terrible.'

"Why?"

'The reason given for your household, the class representative and the brown girl's absences is that you are all down with influenza. The timing is completely wrong, the lack of creativity is off the charts. Please think up a slightly more reasonable excuse, okay?'

"Haha... Well, that's because we left everything on the school side for Kaidou-sensei to handle..."

Then for the next while, in a manner that one could tell if she was reporting or complaining, Shiraho explained about the latest happenings at school. Although cursing of 'die' and 'perish' were thrown at him nonstop, to be honest, Haruaki found it a little unbelievable that she did not simply hang up the phone as expected.

For some reason, Shiraho's displeased voice, her cold and uncaring voice, sounded very pleasant to his ears.

Haruaki wondered if he was hoping that someone could abandon him completely, not caring at all like this—You're none of my concern, your nervousness and worries are nothing at all. In the end, he had simply grown weak. He simply wanted liberation.

"What about Sovereignty?"

'...Why are you asking that?'

"Eh? No, it's nothing."

'Stop lying. She is sleeping right beside me. You intend to ask about her sleeping posture or you're going to have me place the receiver against

Sovereignty's skin, saying you are able to sense the texture of her skin through the reflection of electromagnetic waves. Both requests are denied. I absolutely refuse to allow Sovereignty to become the target of your dark lust, human.'

"I'm not a superhero with amazing powers like that... But anyway, forget it if she's sleeping."

If someone was sleeping next to her, chatting for too long would not be appropriate. Time to end the call. Haruaki finally said:

"Sorry, but we'll still be absent tomorrow, because there's something important to do. But it does mean that I expect things to be over tomorrow."

The message behind these words probably reached her.

However, she simply answered in a refreshing manner:

'I see. Not like it matters to me.'

That nonchalance seemed to be saying "don't get too fired up," causing Haruaki to recover his calm. This trivial matter was nothing. Come tomorrow, Konoha would have returned to this home. That was all. And the day after that, school life was going to resume as usual.

'By the way, I won't be telling Sovereignty about "the game you intend to play." Because if she might want to go if she knew. However, even if it means crying or begging or stripping in the streets, I will absolutely stop her.'

"Your methods of stopping her are baffling, but I understand. We'll be fine on our own. Umm, I'm so sorry for suddenly calling you—"

'...Hold it right there. I forgot something. You wouldn't be planning to contact other girls like this apart from me, to engage in late night rape by phone call, would you? Or is that exactly what you intend to do next?'

"O-Of course not. I'm planning to sleep."

Only after a second, as though in deep thought, Shiraho said:

'...I see. Good.'

Then she hung up. Haruaki smiled wryly as though feeling troubled.

In any case, he felt his mood lighten slightly. He should be able to sleep now? Just as he was about to flip his cellphone shut—

"Oh?"

His cellphone vibrated, informing him of a text message. The timing was too perfect. Has my phone ever been this active within such a brief period? Thinking that, Haruaki opened the text message. He was thinking perhaps it came from Shiraho who had just finished the call, but no—even rarer than Shiraho, a miraculous person had sent this text message with miraculous timing.

This was the girl who lived far out west. The girl who lived with her family.

The title read "In rehab." Just like her usual tone of voice, the contents read gruffly: "They kept insisting I send it, totally annoying, so I'm sending this." At the same time, a photo was attached. "Rehab" might have a double meaning perhaps, Haruaki wondered. In the photo, using a hand that was slightly bandaged, she was stroking a big dog while making a sulking expression. This was the same breed as the large dog whose misplaced faith was abused, leaving mental trauma in her heart. She was currently stroking the dog. Also, behind her and the dog, there was also an adult woman watching them with gentle eyes.

"...Haha."

Haruaki could imagine who was the one who took this photo, as well as his dialogue with the girl. "Try finding a friend to send this to." "Shut up." "Why not just send it to those people from earlier?" "Th-They're not friends!" "If you don't send it, I'm gonna take that as proof that you have no friends. Eh, I can't believe that I've got a coworker who's so lonely that she doesn't even have a single person to send text messages to!" "F-Freakin' incompetent...!" Something like that, probably.

Speaking of which, Bivorio had also sent a text message a few days earlier with something similar to a report. As mentioned by Pakuaki during the school excursion, the Lab Chief's Nation had apparently contacted them about the date for returning Hinai Elsie. Soon after, perhaps the number of people was going to increase in similar photos.

(...Oh.)

Looking at Kururi in the photo, Haruaki suddenly thought of something. Then he pondered for a while. The feelings of acceptance and denial fought each other. But in the end—

"That's right. No matter what, everything that can be done should first be done properly—"

Haruaki silently got up and out of the futon.

This was nothing much.

Simply preparation for what needed to be done tomorrow, he finally discovered another one of them.

Part 7

Before Lilyhowell Kilmister's eyes, on a table that was left behind in the abandoned building, several Wathes were spread in a row under the moonlight. She was making final adjustments for tomorrow.

That said, there was not much that could be done. Some Wathes would activate their curse-granted abilities simply when unsheathed. At most, all she could do was carefully scrub the hilts and the scabbard to prevent slipping from her hand in a critical moment. She also pulled the belts and straps used to secure the Wathes on her back, confirming their conditions and lengths so as to adjust them.

Having finished what needed to be done, she gazed at the table again. A collection of swords of differing lengths and shapes. Originally there was a total of nine. Among them, the «Wathe Breaker», the only sword not a Wathe, as well as «Stick Me Please» had been destroyed, leaving seven swords currently. Most important among them, the key to tomorrow was—

(...It is a given.)

Her gaze rested on that sword. At the same time, she recalled what happened a few days earlier. The conversation with them. Back when they had asked about this Wathe's origins.

This sword came from the Saga of Asmund the Champion-Killer—This answer was not fabricated. Suddenly questioned, believing that hesitation would be very dangerous, she could not help but let the true answer slip.

(I definitely took a risk. It is truly most fortunate that they are not familiar with sagas... If they were to investigate out of curiosity, it would be troublesome, but that has not happened, apparently.)

In other words, the risk was over. Preparations were complete.

Preparations for killing Nirushaaki.

Preparations for achieving that goal which must be achieved at all costs.

Then all that remained was waiting for the arrival of the moment when this cursed sword activated its taboo power according to its characteristics.

Lilyhowell continued to stare at the sword before her.

Staring at that black longsword which those people believed to be a poisoned sword—

Part 8

There was a balcony on the western mansion's second floor. A silent space where pale moonlight was quietly descending.

Nirushaaki was sitting on the floor of the balcony with her back against the railings.

Using her palm, she popped a small mountain of pills into her mouth then crushed them with her teeth. Then tilting the cup held in her other hand, she allowed the liquid to flow down her throat. A liquid containing a mixture of protein and powdered medication. The meal was not over. Taking out powder wrapped in paper, she poured the powder onto her fist and snorted it with her nose.

Only now did she finally get a drunken feeling. Next came a sense of nausea and disrupted balance. However, she suppressed all this with her willpower. Not once was she devoured by that discomfort or sense of ecstasy. This was a given. Because this was simply refilling behavior that was undertaken out of necessity.

"A curse necessitating the intake of drugs? How troublesome."

"...It stems from the origins of my mask. This cannot be helped either."

Walking out of the house, Muramasa was twisting the corners of her lips in disgust. She moved forward silently, walking over to Nirushaaki's side. Then resting her elbows on the balcony's railings, she looked up into the night sky.

Nirushaaki went on to take out a sheet of capsules from her front pocket. Ripping the packaging open noisily, she popped the capsules into her mouth like candy. Narcotics with a powerful drunken feeling did work effect on the curse, but blindly ingesting narcotics was bad for the body's health after all. Although cold medication on the market had a weak effect, since it was considered "at type of drug," she would ingest large amounts in this manner to stall the curse.

"Thou wouldst ingest the likes of opium on occasion? I am surprised that thou art stil able to maintain a normal presence of mind."

"Because I only use narcotics at the minimum required level. Besides, a dragon's willpower is also very strong."

"Ha, I suppose."

After chewing the capsules, she then swallowed digestive medicine in powdered form. This was like dessert after a meal. Although the cold medicine was sold over-the-counter, eating too much of it also took a heavy toll on the stomach—although the digestive medicine was partially taken for its soothing effects.

While sipping the last of the protein drink, Nirushaaki said:

"—It is almost time."

"Borrowing thy words, master... Dragonslaying, is it?"

"No. The dragon refers to the concept of strength, the pinnacle of strength that no one has ever reached—Even the Commander cannot be considered the dragon itself. Because he shall lose to me."

"Hmm, that doth make sense."

Looking down towards Nirushaaki, Muramasa curled the corners of her lips.

"This is merely a contest for the position nearest to the dragon—namely, the «Head». But of course, the concept of the dragon lies ahead of that.

Only by dining on its flesh and blood does it count as the ritual for us to approach the dragon..."

"In other words, a change of heads. No matter what, standing at the top is superior to standing below, of course—By the way, I have yet to ask so far, how strong is the current «Head»?"

"He is the existence closest to the dragon. It goes without saying that he is the strongest among the Draconians. Before obtaining you, if he and I were to duel, chances of my victory would be roughly 20%."

"Hohou, how impressive. But then again, 'tis possible that Kotetsu is not up to par. Well then, now that thou hast acquired me, what are the chances of victory?"

Muramasa asked as though watching a good show. After hesitating for an instant, Nirushaaki decided to answer truthfully.

"50%—slightly optimistically, 55%."

"What is that, thou sayest~?"

Only this little? Murmamasa was clearly displeased. Simply the fact that there was a possibility of winning in a duel against the Commander was already a miracle. But even if Nirushaaki explained to her, who had never faced him in actual combat, she probably would not understand.

"But if you, Kotetsu and I bring out our full power and even fight with the resolve to put our lives on the line, we are 100% certain to seize that 55% probability of victory. Muramasa, do you have that resolve?"

"Always, from the very start. 'Tis the usual way of wars. No matter who the enemy may be, one must always carry the resolve to be ready to die anywhere, any time. The strength of resolve determineth the speed the sword is unsheathed."

Murmamasa answered instantly, giving off vibes that seemed to say "did you really have to ask?" How dependable of her.

"Hearing you say 'no matter who the enemy may be,' I am reminded—Before fighting the Commander, those fellows may appear again. Namely, Fear-in-Cube and Lilyhowell Kilmister."

"Thou speakest of those deplorably weak fellows?"

"At the very least, Lilyhowell Kilmister's obsession cannot be underestimated. The nature of obsession lies in the fact that it grows stronger with every defeat—Perhaps her next showing might prove to be more promising. Overconfidence could very well lead to the breaking of your blade, Muramasa."

Nirushaaki warned in a half-joking manner. Muramasa also chuckled in her throat in response. She turned around and leaned her back against the balcony railing. This action was probably pointless. By facing the same direction as Nirushaaki, all she would see was the interior of the house. All she would see was Kotetsu, sprawled in bed, sleeping soundly in exhaustion after being toyed with for so long, his hair an utter mess, having been forced to go through repeated changes of hairstyle.

"I did mention just now, did I not? Although 'twould be akin to teaching fish swim. Upon standing on the battlefield, one must carry the resolve to be ready to die any time. The same goeth for a sword—The resolve preparing one to be broken any time. I have witnessed it countless times. Blades reaching the end of their lives, breaking for the most trivial of reasons. No matter how unworthy of mentioning the reason may be, swords break inevitably."

Such as—She proceeded to list examples.

Facing a general pulled down from his horse, about to deliver the killing blow, a sword ended up breaking when struck by a stray arrow. Smug and complacent after vanquishing a general, a sword broke when ambushed by a member of peasant militia. After a heroic duel, a sword broke because the master's hand slipped, letting it fall to the ground where it was trampled by a horse.

"Swords are sharper than anything else, but consequently, they are also more brittle than everything else. The danger of breaking any moment... Haha."

"What is the matter?"

Muramasa's shoulders suddenly shook with laughter. Nirushaaki looked up at her face. With the night sky and the bright moon as a background, she was currently smiling with narrowed eyes.

"Oh my, I must have grown old. To think one such as I would ponder such inane matters. Like that of an enlightened monk's, simply meaningless

drivel. Having lived to such an age, I cannot help but feel that those known as swords..."

Her voice sounded like she was joking. It also conveyed mockery towards herself... no, the existence called the sword.

However, as though gazing out into the distance, as though reflecting the water surface like a sword sunk into the bottom of a lake—only her eyes were showing a mysterious, ever-changing light of varying intensity.

"Perhaps sometimes, I am waiting for day when I shall be broken..."

After a moment's pause, Nirushaaki asked:

"You too?"

"Ha. I have absolutely no intention of breaking at the hands of others. Nevertheless..."

Muramasa continued to gaze forward with profoundness in her eyes.

Still carrying a faint, wry smile as she gazed upon Kotetsu sleeping soundly in the house—her fellow kin sharing the same destiny.

In an extremely calm tone of voice, she continued:

"There existeth no sword in this world that doth not break. Even if one existed... 'Twould finally rot away in time one day."

Chapter 6 - The Curse Known as a Wish; Its Final Fate / "The blade - It's (un)breakable."

Part 1

"Hmm..."

She opened her eyes and woke up. Not because someone called her to get up nor because she recently learned how to use her cellphone's alarm function. It could have been the signs of the gradually brightening sky, transmitted through the paper sliding door—Or perhaps it was the blinking of the cellphone, its faint light piercing the room's darkness, informing her that a certain message had been received.

She opened her cellphone and tapped to operate it with her finger. A text message. Although there was no subject, the sender's name was enough to send her wide awake immediately. Hayakawa Chihaya.

The message was written in her characteristically rough tone of voice—

'Although I've personally served you pain already, there are still others who deserve to be hurt. So, I'll have to trouble you to do it in my place. If you dare fail and come back like a loser, I'll give you even more pain than last time. Prepare yourself.'

Fear recalled the pain from when Chihaya had delivered a slap to her cheek. She never expected to receive a text message from her with this kind of timing for Chihaya had been ignoring them ever since then. Could someone have told her today was the day of the showdown?

"But she's right. Yume... Because of me, Nirushaaki and the Commander—she lost her life. Although she was a member of the Draconians, it's still true that your friend died."

Just like the way she had slapped her, Chihaya surely wanted to hit those people too. Impossible to reason with, she was always driven by emotions.

Fear believed this was fine. And since Chihaya had asked her to do so, she had no reason to refused. Since Chihaya had asked for that pain on her cheek, that very painful strike, to be delivered for the enemy to savor as well.

"Yeah... Of course. I'll do it."

There were a number of reasons why Nirushaaki must be defeated. I'll just have to figure out my relationship with Cow Tits after that. Although there are more things to consider, I can leave them aside for now.

Furthermore, the choice of avoiding a face off against those people never existed in the first place. Even if she stayed at home, curled into a ball or paying with her eyes closed, nothing was going to be resolved. In that case—

"...Stepping up is the only option."

All sorts of doubts were still swirling inside her heart, impossible to dispel—

But she felt thankful for the clear motive in her heart. Namely, the ambiguous and abstract motive of teaching the enemy a harsh lesson on Chihaya's behalf, which was massive and unshakable nonetheless.

Fear got out of bed and clutched the Rubik's cube kept next to her pillow.

One. Next was the second one beside it.

Holding in her hand the toy cube inherited from Yume, Fear inexplicably found its sense of weight more firm and reliable than ever before.

Leaving the bedroom in the accessory dwelling, under the incredible colors of the pre-dawn sky, Kuroe walked to the outside staircase with quiet footsteps.

What should I pick for a punishment game? Kuroe wondered. For example, demanding that she spend a whole day ending all her sentences with weird verbal tics. Dressing her up in various costumes would be nice too. Like making her wear last time's Magical Scorching Girl outfit, or splendid costumes no one had ever seen before. I could also have her play games with me, whether analog or digital ones. Despite looking uninterested on first glance, she's actually quite competitive in personality and very fun. I can also have her help out at the beauty parlor, like tending shop in a weird outfit. After all, I've been closed for business recently all this time, having her give a little help shouldn't be too unreasonable. Then even if I ask her wear skimpy clothes offering faint glimpses of the goods, she can't complain, right...?

"Hmm, my dream is really growing bigger and bigger."

Precisely because she was cursed, she always wanted to watch happy things forever.

She had already decided to maintain this mentality as much as possible.

After coming to this home and understanding she could stay here...

"Does Kono-san still remember what happened that time? I guess... she's already forgotten?"

Murmuring softly, she looked up at the sky at the same time.

"Then I guess I must make you remember. If I can't use that sure thing of a fundoshi to bully you anymore, it'd be such a shame~"

She hoped she could continue watching happy things forever.

Without particular meaning, she decided it would be better to do more than less.

Hence, Kuroe lightly clapped her hands together and prayed to the sky with its incredible colors.

Standing at the entrance, Kirika was checking her appearance in the full length mirror. Out of considerations for ease of movement and economy in the event of damage, as well as the convenience of substitution—She decided to set off dressed in school uniform. Besides, having gotten caught up in many recent battles while in uniform, she already gave up and bought many sets beforehand. Even if one or two sets went out of commission, it was nothing of consequence.

"However... I guess being dressed in uniform does suit my style. It's my usual look."

She leaned forward slightly, bringing her face closer to the mirror. The usual hairstyle. Definitely washed her face. Although her eyes seemed a little intimidating and her expression was cold too, there was no helping it by this point. She made her decision and tried smiling—still sort of acceptable. Yes. When smiling, it was still acceptable...

"Ho... Absolutely ridiculous."

Pulling herself back, she saw her reflection smiling faintly with wryness. Now that was more like herself. No additional decorations, her standard look as usual. She believed it suited today very well.

Because for her, today was also an important day.

For the sake of coming to terms with her feelings, this day held absolutely inescapable significance.

"Well then, it's time to go."

With an appearance that suited her, in a mood that suited her, Kirika put on her shoes like going to school as usual, opening the front door without giving it a further thought.

Okay—Let's go.

To complete her confession.

Haruaki gently picked up her glasses on his desk and stroked the frame with his fingertips.

"If she gets her memory back... It's better to have glasses."

Wrapping the glasses in a handkerchief, he placed it in his pocket.

This was the final set of preparations. Everything else needed had already been done.

After surveying the room and confirming this fact, Haruaki nodded as though cheering himself on and turned around.

Nothing else could hinder his footsteps now.

"Ready to go?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, time to leave~ We already decided where we're meeting up, right?"

After Haruaki converged with Fear and Kuroe, they left the house together. It took everything the could to suppress the impulse to run at full speed.

There was only one desired goal. This was the day for actualizing that goal.

Indeed.

Today, absolutely, he was going to bring Konoha back.

Thinking over this matter repeatedly while staring straight ahead, Haruaki started walking.

Part 2

The enemy neither hid nor ran away. Identical to one week earlier, they faced off again in that mansion's garden.

One side was Haruaki, Fear, Kuroe and Kirika. As well as—unlike the previous occasion—Lilyhowell who was allied with them, carrying many swords on her back. Perhaps due to tension, she seemed even colder than usual, her entire body shrouded in an aura of unpleasant gloom. Haruaki could sense that she was casting her gloomy gaze upon him more frequently than usual. Was she worried whether he would be able to carry out the battle plan successfully?

The opposing lineup remained unchanged. Attired differently this time but giving off the same impression, Kotetsu was dressed in Wa Lolita fashion with a Shinsengumi haori worn on top. This was probably Kotetsu's only battle outfit. Just by having the haori added, Kotetsu's vigor felt different from usual, exuding airs of acute ferocity even surpassing past encounters. Another person was Konoha, still dressed precariously in the gorgeous kimono. Finally, barefooted, dressed in nothing but an American Indian shirt, holding a mask decorated with feathers, wearing a pair of swirlly glasses that ill-suited her, there was Nirushaaki.

"Well then... I shall exhibit my true skills today. It would be best not to waste too much time on warmup exercises. After warming up, all that would be left is focusing on the main and proper event—"

"Perfect. Then let's settle this...!"

Fear declared. Hearing that, Konoha shrugged, unconvinced.

"Ha, such audacious words. Perhaps thou shalt flee at the first signs that the situation goeth against thy favor."

"What did you say!?"

"In any event... I have had enough of ye. Now that ye have arrived, then I shall serve as your opponents. As the saying goeth, ye can only try a saint's patience so far. Do not make the mistake of believing ye can retreat unscathed again."

While baring her teeth in a malicious grin, Konoha exuded a dark murderous intent from all over her body. Just as her master had mentioned about exhibiting her true skills, Konoha looked like she also intended to fight seriously. The other girl—correction, boy was the same. No, the displeasure and hostility in his eyes could not compare to Konoha's at all.

"Do you people really care that much about bringing Muramasa-sama back...!?"

"For us, the usual Kono-san is the true Kono-san."

"Shut up! Truth be told, a pathetic and rusted sword is utterly meaningless! It was no easy task transforming Muramasa-sama back to her old self. Transforming her into one who shares a collective existence with me! To think you want her to turn back into that kind of blunt sword—Your foolishness knows no bounds! I won't accept it no matter what!"

"How truly presumptuous in your beliefs. Absolutely ridiculous."

"Yeah. You're free to think what you like, but it's also our freedom to disagree. We're definitely going to bring the usual Konoha—even though I'm not able to do anything."

"Ha! Truth be told, you are clearly a man, but look how truly pathetic you."

Hearing Kotetsu's mockery, Haruaki quietly turned his gaze away. Of course, not being able to do anything was a lie. Even if mocked or ridiculed, Haruaki was fine with it provided he was able to accomplish his mission in the end.

Haruaki secretly glanced at Lilyhowell. She had long stopped looking so concerned about him and was now staring straight at Nirushaaki with eyes filled with dark willpower.

Of course, in order not to arouse suspicions on Nirushaaki's side, the «Toxic Sword Poison Ritter» that Haruaki was going to wield was still kept carried on Lilyhowell's back. During the instant when the opportunity arrived, Kuroe was going to use her hair to extract the sword together with its scabbard from Lilyhowell's back then throw it to Haruaki. They had practiced this step already.

But before that, Nirushaaki and the Japanese swords must be fully restrained first, even if only for an instant. To this end, Haruaki could only rely on Fear and the others to put in their best effort.

Nirushaaki then took off her glasses and put on her mask instead. Namely, the decorated mask that was connected to two other masks by a ring. Although there were super deformed elements on the masks that were extremely filled with tribal flavor, the current mask she was wearing seemed to be depicting an expression of anger.

Fear took out a Rubik's cube while taunting:

"I was thinking before, is it really okay for you to take off your glasses? It'll be problematic if you can't see in front of you, teacher."

"No need to worry. My poor vision originates from this mask's second curse—As long as I am wearing this mask, even without wearing glasses, my eyes can still function normally."

Having said that, Nirushaaki took a step forward, her left hand dangling naturally by her side.

"—Let us begin."

Waiting on hand by the side, Kotetsu took a leap, transforming into a Japanese sword to be held in her left hand. Likewise—

"Having said that I shall exhibit my true skills... Ha, this shall end in an instant."

Also transformed into a Japanese sword, Konoha was held in Nirushaaki's right hand.

Kotetsu in her left and Murmamasa in her right. Her naked body was clad in nothing except for the «Wounded Knee Massacre» garment that neutralized all attacks. Niruashaaki walked silently forward on her barefeet with their snow-white complexion. Invincible defense combined with the strongest dual wielded swords.

This was it—Nirushaaki's true skills currently. It was evidently her combat state with nothing held back.

Furthermore, the bizarre mask covering her face was not mere decoration, of course. Lilyhowell had mentioned that it seemed to be tool for self-augmentation...

Probably noticing Haruaki's gaze, Nirushaaki spoke while continuing to walk:

"«Ionyomott of the Past»... is this mask's name. This mask will absorb part of the strength of slain enemies, thereby supplying the wearer with the stored power—Its curse grants it the ability to raise overall arm strength, agility and endurance."

"Hmm, then it works like experience points in RPG systems? Like becoming stronger the more enemies you defeat...? That's so unfair."

Ignoring Kuroe's groaning remark, Nirshaaki said:

"To the strength obtained from the enemies I have defeated so far—let your strength be added now. You should feel honored!"

Then switching from stillness to action, Nirushaaki leaned forward and started sprinting all at once. Let alone a fusion of east and west, she was essentially a wild beast whose weapons and equipment were far too contradictory in style.

"Strength, strength! That's all you people talking about, it's making my ears grow calluses! Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form:
«Human-Perforator»—Curse Calling!"

Yelling out, Fear turned her Rubik's cube into a drill of torture in her hand.

At last, the battle commenced for taking Konoha back.

Part 3

Probably due to the mask's powers, Nirushaaki's strength was astonishing. Even when Fear made a thrust of the drill combined with the speed of a sprint, it was easily deflected by a swing of Kotetsu. Fear could sense Kirika's belt and Kuroe's hair extending from her left and right to serve as cover. At the same time, she retreated for now to regroup—

While the «Tragic Black River» and Kuroe's hair were being severed, Fear could see Lilyhowell ahead. She was using «My Bloody Valentine» to engage Konoha on Nirushaaki's right. Then taking an opportunity to reach towards her back with her left hand, Lilyhowell drew out a dagger from the shortest sheath. Once drawn, she immediately let go. Fear was expecting her to throw it away, but the dagger remained unnaturally in midair. Then—

"Go forth... «Epetamu»!"

"Ohoh! A new toy!"

The Ainu dagger flew through the air autonomously, stabbing towards Nirushaaki. While Konoha was deflecting the dagger, Lilyhowell used her left hand again to draw the burning sword.

"«ESP»!"

She was able to dual wield too—no, considering the dagger flying in the air, it could be described as triple wielding—to attack Nirushaaki. Fear was not going to lose to her either.

"Mechanism No.22 bludgeoning type, spike-ball form: «Morgenstern»!"

If only this supermassive spiked metal club could just smash everything, whether Kotetsu or Nirushaaki's arms and legs. Everything would come to an end once that was achieved. Then things would not need to get so complicated. Lilyhowell's battle plan was based on the assumption that Kotetsu and Konoha's combined defense was flawlessly perfect. But if Fear could break through their defense, there would be no problem. Then Haruaki would no need to sully his hands either.

"Take this!"

"Truth be told, in contest of pure strength—This Kotetsu's blade absolutely cannot be shattered!"

The spiked metal club was blocked using one hand, but Fear did not give up and continued to exert pressure on the opponent. Probably trying to divert the enemy's attention as much as possible, the hair and belt kept extending, even though they were being sliced apart by Kotetsu's slicing aura that seemed to be distributed in the entire space.

"No improvement at all. Why won't you people understand that you can't defeat us? Truth be told, it is incomprehensible."

"I agree. You people should have gained a certain level of knowledge about me. Yes. Then since you already know, could it be that—?"

"Hahaha! Foolish, foolish, no matter what, too foolish! Clearly repeating the same result time and again, why can they not understand—Well then, I have seen that sword's critical weakness! Since it looketh quite scorching, allow me to liberate thee from thy suffering!"

"Guh—!"

Lilyhowell frantically withdrew her left arm while accompanied by the sound of something exploding violently, the flaming longsword she was originally holding in her left was shattered. As the flickering bright red flame sliced through the air for the last instant, the sword fell to the ground as ordinary pieces of iron.

"Oh my, I was thinking the aftershock could slice off a finger of thine. How sharp thy instincts are. Is it because thou hast seen it once before already?"

Without saying a word, Lilyhowell used her burned hand to clutch another sword. The golden «Calamitous Sword of Sigarsholm». Using terror as energy, it was the sword whose tip could extend and contract at will.

Mixed among «Epetamu»'s automatic attacks, Lilyhowell went on the offensive again. Fear also swung the spiked metal club with all her might. However, not only did Nirushaaki's defense hold up, she even started to counterattack. In order to exert force, Fear went too close to the enemy. Kotetsu's blade brushed past her shoulder, causing intense pain.

"Although the unpredictable movements are tricky, 'tis too light-weight after all. In that case, 'twould be like swatting a fly, using full strength—In this manner!"

Konoha's blade flashed towards «Epetamu» which was flying and circling in the air. «Epetamu» instantly shattered. Not only that, it was instantly imbued with opposite momentum, causing the fragments to fly away. Unknown whether it was aimed intentionally or not, the remains of «Epetamu» stabbed into Lilyhowell's arm. Although the wound was probably not deep, damage was still done.

Just as Lilyhowell threw down the dagger embedded in her arm, intending to retreat—

"Hey, the other side!"

«My Bloody Valentine», which Kirika had gone as far as severing her wrist in order to strengthen the sword's sharpness, was also destroyed by Konoha's counter. Perhaps reacting too slow ultimately, Lilyhowell gained another fresh wound on her arm. At this rate, she'll just keep retreating in defeat, what a pain—thinking that to herself, Fear said:

"Let's swap! I'll handle that side!"

"...Understood."

She switched positions with Lilyhowell. Even Konoha's blade can't destroy the torture tools that are my emulated forms—Probably.

"Oh my, 'tis thee again?"

"Don't sound like you're tired of me!"

"But in actual fact, Muramasa probably is weary of you for real."

No longer facing Kotetsu, the option of smashing the weapon together with Nirushaaki's limbs was no longer available. Fear's only recourse was to get past Konoha's blade and accurately hack off an arm or a leg of Nirushaaki's, or circle around her to deliver a blow to her back—Fear had no idea if she was able to do any of that, but there was no choice but to try her best in spite of the odds.

Turning the Rubik's cube into a hatchet, Fear fought against Konoha wielded in Nirushaaki's hand. Unlike Haruaki, Nirushaaki possessed combat ability on her own. Konoha entrusted her body's active control to Nirushaaki while simply focusing on improving the quality of movement together with Kotetsu. Given the increase in power conferred by the mask combined with the physical assistance provided by the two swords—Fear felt that Nirushaaki's speed and strength was enough to rival Hinai Elsie's movements.

"Take this...! Damn Cow Tits..."

"Stop calling me that!"

"Like I'll listen to you! That's what I've always called you from the start! How can I change by this point!"

Indeed, starting with our first encounter. Starting from the time when you brought meat meat meat and potato stew. Why did I call you that? Of course it's because you've got a body shape that fits the name. It was also because it felt inexplicably infuriating how you could smile together with Haruaki so naturally. Just when I was wondering "Can I trust this guy?" A weird woman with huge boobs suddenly popped up and stole him away. Of course I'd get mad, it's totally natural. Even though I was still so ill at ease back then.

"Back then, your body also had that familiar presence of a curse. I could immediately tell that you're one of my kind. Sigh, to think that the first

fellow cursed tool I meet would be you, looking back now, I really think it's utterly unfortunate..."

"Again, thou art grumbling and complaining about matters I have no memory of."

"So what!? But still remember!"

The hatchet and the sword collided. Why hasn't she remembered? Fear was greatly incensed. She's supposed to dislike me in turn. I'm supposed to see her agitated. So she's supposed to remember. I'm that important inside her heart, right?

Probably. It would be fine if that were probably the case.

Because...

In Fear's own heart in turn, so very much—

"A weapon whose gimmick is merely an extensible sword tip definitely cannot defeat this Kotetsu here!"

"In that case... «Gladiator's Zulfiqar»."

"...!"

Lilyhowell drew out another sword to dual wield. That sword... was the signal.



In the real match, I intend to use this sword. In other words, as soon as this sword is drawn, it means that the operation will start. Please be prepared to coordinate at any time—That was what Lilyhowell had told them. She probably decided to draw the sword after switching opponents from Konoha to Kotetsu, thus resulting in a lower chance of weapon destruction.

(Tsk...)

It still arrived. As much as Fear was loathed to carry it out, but the instant for the operation still arrived, leaving her no choice.

Even now, she still had no idea if it was right to let Haruaki to sully his own hands, to let him experience the smell of blood and the touch of death directly. If that happened, would Haruaki get cursed? Such worries were in Fear's heart. Compared to the curses enveloping their bodies, this was closer to a kind of concept, a curse that marked the soul.

However, now that things had developed to this step, hesitation was forbidden. This pertained to Haruaki's life. Once the opportunity came, all she could do was cooperate with the plan. So long as Haruaki did not give up, all she could do was cooperate—

In Lilyhowell's hand was a curved sword of Middle Eastern style with no notable characteristics in appearance. Next, Lilyhowell made a thrust with the scimitar. Guarding Nirushaaki's left body, Kotetsu allowed the blade to slide past before parrying it away effortlessly—

"What... the...!?"

Then Kotetsu groaned. Originally supposed to attack after parrying the scimitar, Kotetsu still remained in contact with the scimitar's blade. Although there was some slight shaking, only a gap of several millimeters appeared and Kotetsu could not pull away any further.

"This—I am getting clamped by something—!?"

Fear understood, having heard the explanation beforehand. That «Gladiator's Zulfiqar» was a sword that had a second, invisible blade existing parallel to the original blade.

It during a spectacle presented before a king. For the sake of his daughter who had been taken hostage by his opponent, the father, a gladiator, had no choice but to die, even without the opponent's sword stabbing anywhere fatal. Hence, from a dead angle where the king could not see,

the gladiator pierced his own throat to commit suicide. As though there were a second sword, he was pierced to death by a sword that did not exist. That was the kind of sword the opponent possessed.

After understanding how the trick worked, Kotetsu attempted to retreat and draw out his blade, but he could not allowed to succeed.

"Let terror reside in this sword—«Calamitous Sword of Sigarsholm»!"

Lilyhowell extended the golden longsword's tip while closing in at the same time. Using it in concert with «Gladiator's Zulfiqar», she barely managed to prevent Kotetsu from escaping.

(Damn it! I've got no choice but to go...!)

Fear also prepared herself. Lilyhowell's method of restraint was completely putting her own life on the line. If Fear did not pin down Konoha, Lilyhowell was going to die in the next instant.

"Hmm~? Kotetsu seems to be—"

"Cow Tits, your opponent is me! I can see that you're getting full of yourself after breaking all these boring weapons, but you ain't gonna break me. But if I get crushed by your super heavy udders, it might be even more dangerous!"

"Oh? How shallow a taunt... But I shall play with thee!"

Konoha flew for a strike. Fear blocked with the hatchet. A clash between crossed blades was exactly what she needed.

"Mechanism No.27 grinding type, cog-wheel form: «Gear Wheel Trismegistus»—Curse Calling!"

In that instant, Fear quickly transformed the hatchet into a device composed from three interlocking gears. With lightning speed, she operated the geared device in full force, creaking and grating away as Konoha was dragged between the gears in mutual contact.

"Muu!?"

But ultimately, the sword could not be broken immediately. Not only that, this device's original purpose was for ensnaring victim's limbs then crushing them. Whether it was capable of keeping an extremely thin object like a sword restrained completely was still an unknown question. As a

result, while Konoha was still struggling to break free, Fear used her unoccupied hand to fish out the other Rubik's cube, pressing it on top of «Gear Wheel Trismegistus».

"Dual Emulation—Mechanism No.3 severance type, descending form: «Guillotine»!"

Then she transformed it into the guillotine mechanism. In manner closer to pushing it down rather than letting it fall, she used the guillotine's thick blade to clamp down on the body of Konoha's blade. Fear then reached out to hold down the guillotine's blade with her own hand, preventing Konoha from escaping easily.

"Ha—I see, I see. Thou seemest to have altered thy manner of fighting slightly! However, this is nowhere near enough to break my blade!"

"There's totally... no need to break you at all!"

Preparations were ready. Fear restrained Konoha's movements desperately. In the corner of her eye, she could see her companions' black avatars suddenly moving rapidly as though they had been waiting a long time for this moment.

"Now is the time—«Tragic Black River»!"

"Mode: «Killing Machine Masakado»!"

In order to stay away from the slicing auras of the two immobilized swords, Kirika's belt and Kuroe's hair wrapped themselves around Nirushaaki's extremities. Shoulders, elbows, abdomen, waist and ankles.

"Oh? Even my body is restrained as well."

While Nirushaaki could be heard murmuring, one of Kuroe's bundles of hair took other action.

That bundle of hair reached towards the back of Lilyhowell while she was pinning Kotetsu down, suddenly extracting one of the swords there.

Then together with its scabbard, the sword was thrown to the back.

The sword flew in a parabolic trajectory. Only one person showed up at the spot it landed.

Because everything had happened for this one moment.

Neither a miracle nor a stroke of luck, this was preordained.

The timing was perfect.

Having started sprinting already, Haruaki ran over to the landing spot, firmly catching the flying sword in midair—

"Yeahhhhhh!"

Shouting in a manner that did not suit him, he drew out the black blade from the scabbard.

"Hmm...?"

Nirushaaki seemed to groan from beneath her mask. She really had not expected this development, right? It would be terrible if she had.

Kuroe and Kirika did not relax their restraints on Nirushaaki. Fear and Lilyhowell could still barely manage to contain the two swords they were responsible for. Only now. By this point, there was no turning back. There was no way to stop Haruaki anymore—!

Haruaki tossed the scabbard aside and sprinted even harder. Step by step, he was gradually approaching Nirushaaki head on.

One step, another step, yet another.

Although this felt like an eternity to Fear, this duration passed within the blink of an eye.

Then finally arriving in front of Nirushaaki, he—

In accordance with the practiced motion, he made a thrust with the sword towards the practiced location—

At the time—Haruaki was thinking, this will work!

Held in his hand was the weight he had already grown accustomed to through training, the shape he was already accustomed to. He was no longer affected by the sword's weight. There was no problem as long as he remained calm. Over these past few days, he had repeated the same action over and over again. Using this sword to thrust towards Nirushaaki's leg. That alone was enough. The target was also fully immobilized by Fear and the others. Hence he could not possibly miss. This will work...

On the other hand, the girls who were watching him—

Don't get cursed—Fear prayed. I wish the person named Yachi Haruaki won't get cursed.

I'll shoulder it—Kirika vowed. His hand will be equivalent to my own hand.

What will she say? Kuroe wondered. I really hope she won't lose her temper after coming back.

The only thing common to these four girls' thoughts was—Everything ends here.

However, only one person was thinking something completely different.

—Everything begins here. Lilyhowell thought.

Regarding what was to happen in the next instant, only she alone was predicting an outcome different from Fear and the girls.

According to the predicted plan, Yachi Haruaki was going to die now.

Because—

Part 4

"So this sort of thing... is your hidden trump card?"

In Haruaki's view, Nirushaaki simply shook her head lightly. Despite having the weapons in both hands suppressed and her four limbs tied down, she could not be prevented from making this sort of minor movement.

In this manner, she rotated the masks on her head. More precisely, she rotated the ring that connected the three masks, switching over to a mask that had remained on the side of her head until now—

Rather than the mask emulating an angry visage, this one simulated a sad expression.

"«Rew of the Present»... This mask..."

Haruaki found it strange to hear Nirushaaki's voice coming from much further ahead than expected.

Not the place where he was about to stab with the poisoned sword.

Nor the place where Fear and the whole group had immobilized her—Instead, her voice came from several meters further ahead.

"Its curse grants the ability to instantaneously teleport to a location one has visited in the past."

Her shirt, mask and both swords were still equipped on her body.

Yet Nirushaaki was standing over there.

Only the hair and belt that had been restraining her just now remained in their original location.

(No way...?)

Haruaki was shocked. Instantly, countless thoughts swirled around in his mind. How did this happen? This was not mentioned at all. This curse was way too powerful. To think it could grant instantaneous teleportation. Freed from restraints. They were had. Completely taken by surprise. What to do? What to do? What do do what to do what to—

During this time, Haruaki's body continued to rush forward, driven by the momentum of his sprinting, unable to stop for now. His body charged. His feet, kicking against the ground. Having lost its target, his body was hesitating, slightly falling forwards. He had two choices. One was to halt his steps and endure the reaction force, the second was—

(...Konoha.)

She was right before his eyes. He was approaching her for real.

Indeed. A little more. Almost there.

All I need to do is touch Nirushaaki's body with this sword—Then Konoha can be rescued!

(Konoha!)

This thought compelled Haruaki's legs to advance, stopping was not an option. Mustering so much vigor that almost made him fall over, he forced his steps to advance.

"Uohhhhh!"

"Haruaki? Wait, don't do it!" "Yachi!" "Haru, hurry and stop!"

He passed between Fear and Lilyhowell. As though restraining an invisible person, entangling space, the «Tragic Black River» and Kuroe's hair frantically moved at this moment, but Haruaki also managed to squeeze through the gap.

Just a little more. Just a little bit more!

Nirushaaki's figure became closer and closer. However, she remained completely still. Yes, I can touch—Just as this thought crossed Haruaki's mind...

"Since you are charging forth with a sword in hand, no matter how weak, you will be regarded as a warrior intending to fight."

"Tis agreed."

Of course, she was staying completely still simply because standing there did not require any action yet.

Simply because the timing of action in her thoughts was far too different from the timing in his thoughts as an amateur.

"Wait... Stop right now, Cow Tits—!"

Fear's scream. A flash of light.

Both reached him at the same time.

A kind of feeling flowed through his body. Like getting eaten away or cut open. The feeling throbbed and jumped as though it were a living creature, causing stimulation as though all his muscles were exposed to light, suddenly making his brain go tense—Only after a moment's delay did Haruaki remember the name of this feeling.

Pain.

"U...Ah!"

It felt as though the frozen time was thrown into a violent vortex, then starting to spin rapidly. Muscles were convulsing, blood was flowing out. An unpleasant sensation under his sleeve. Before his eyes was the masked woman, musing "hmm" quietly. The Japanese sword in her hand, the Japanese sword which was supposed to have pierced his heart, was currently on the exterior side of his shoulder, pushed from its trajectory by

the black sword in his hand. This was the cause of the laceration in his shoulder.

"Oh my. Such an amateur of a brat should not have been able to deflect my blade...?"

Indeed. Haruaki also expected her blade to stab into his heart, but for some reason, he raised his sword subconsciously and barely managed to alter the trajectory of Konoha's advance. Naturally, this was absolutely not because the opponent had shown mercy. This simply stemmed from the fact that he had controlled Konoha many times previously, entrusting his body to her to engage in battle, thus allowing him to guess the blade's trajectory through intuition. In actual fact, it could be called a miracle that he was able to deflect her with a sword. Even if he were asked to repeat the feat, it was uncertain whether he could do so or not.

"No matter. Ultimately just pointless struggling at death's door—Oh!"

"Nirushaaki-sama!"

"TAKE THIS!"

Wielding the hatchet in her right and the drill in her left, Fear charged straight. Nirushaaki swiftly withdrew Konoha and blocked the attacks together with Kotetsu. The «Tragic Black River» and Kuroe's hair proceeded to extend over, but—

"I am still able to return to the past. «Rew of the Present»—«This spirit knows the present sitting over the past»."

Nirushaaki teleported instantaneously again, retreating. Then making use of the resulting distance, she effortlessly sliced through the hair and the belt.

While feeling his shoulder hurt more and more, Haruaki quietly turned his head.

Lilyhowell was standing in the same spot without moving. Then—

"...How unexpected..."

She whispered in a daze. How right she is, Haruaki thought. No one expected the mask to have that kind of ability. No one expected her to struggle free of the restraints so easily.

However, we still can't give up, right? We must think of another way, right?

Nevertheless, as if his thoughts could not be transmitted over...

For some reason, Lilyhowell remained unmoving—

What was unexpected to her was not Nirushaaki using the mask's powers to struggle free of the restraints.

Of course, it was the fact that Haruaki did not die.

Lilyhowell secretly bit her lip.

(What to do...?)

She had known the mask's ability from the very start but had simply withheld the information. Hence, she knew. Under normal combat conditions, touching Nirushaaki with a blade was absolutely impossible. In that case—

There was only one conclusion.

In order to wait until Nirushaaki lowered her guard...

In order to seize the chance for a surprise attack that could only happen once...

She could only continue to wait for the very instant when Yachi Haruaki was killed by Nirushaaki.

Part 5

For a moment, the battle was stalled. Kuroe grumbled, a little at a loss for words:

"Combined with the mask for accumulating experience points, it feels quite unfair..."

"The mask is not that omnipotent. It can only return to locations within several minutes before the present."

"That's quite enough already. In principle, it's totally impossible to restrain you. And even your clothing and equipment moves with you... How absolutely ridiculous. Furthermore, no matter how I look at it, the remaining mask must possess a curse-granted ability of its own."

Kirika gnashed her teeth as she spoke. Nirushaaki shrugged slightly.

"Truly keen observation. This is the cursed mask set, the «Three Masks Passed Down by the Nadengpayaroo»—passed down the generations in a certain Asian tribe, a ritual artifact used to govern three spirits. The present, the past and the future. Taken collectively... This set of masks possesses the ability to see through the user's time."

She turned her head, changing the mask on her face. This time, it was the mask depicting a smiling expression.

"This is «Tutasgai of the Future»—«This spirit knows the future gazed at by the present». Its curse-granted ability is..."

Mid-sentence, Nirushaaki suddenly made a thrust with Kotetsu towards the side. Although it was pointless in terms of distance, she had taken action exactly when Fear had taken a step towards her while feigning inadvertency.

"You intend to circle around to my back while I am speaking, yes?"

"Guh...?"

"How do I know? Because this is its cursed ability. This mask of the future can see the future positions of every person within its field of vision—in other words, you could call it limited precognition. Although at most only a few minutes later."

Probably due to having been found out, Fear stopped moving and groaned with displeasure.

"Master, 'tis time for the chattering to end. Now that fresh blood is finally in sight, I am currently in a state of excitement."

"Truth be told, it is as she says—I would like to see more fresh blood, more."

"Very well. Time for the break to end."

Nirushaaki slowly stepped forward. The members of Haruaki's group entered respective stances in preparation for combat. What should they do?

"Let me summarize... There's the frontal combat mode which uses the experience gained from defeated enemies to raise her stats, there's the

evasive mode allowing her to move to any recent position in the past, then there's the forewarning mode for getting a grasp on future enemy locations—In other words, the enemy can freely switch between using these three modes."

"Instantaneous teleportation means it's impossible to restrain her. Being able to learn future positions means it's impossible to circle around to her back. Even when fighting all-out, her physical stats can be raised... Is that it?"

"The usual pattern is probably to attack whenever she's switching masks..."

"But judging from what we've seen so far, she only takes an instant to switch masks. Let alone seizing the opening to attack, we could end up getting checkmated instead... Tsk. How absolutely ridiculous."

Kirika turned her gaze. Lilyhowell was still standing ahead not far away, still spacing out silently. Kirika clicked her tongue again.

"Although I've no idea if she suffered too great a shock, it's useless now. Fear-kun, what are we doing now?"

"Hmm..."

"I am not so kind that I would permit you to leisurely hold a strategy meeting now."

Nirushaaki sped up all at once.

"Haruaki! Stop acting recklessly! Just stand over there and stay still!"

Just as Fear was about to intercept her, Nirushaaki rapidly switched masks and disappeared from sight.

An instant later, she appeared before Haruaki.

"Moving to a past position—I hope you will not be so naive as believe that I would only use it for escaping. This move is also very useful for advancing!"

The spot where Nirushaaki appeared was along the straight line between Fear and Haruaki. In other words, behind Fear but in front of Haruaki. Fear forcefully spun herself around, swinging the hatchet and the drill. Haruaki instinctively jumped sideways. Kotetsu swept through empty space

whereas Konoha clashed with Fear's tools of torture. Nirushaaki retreated again, as though reloading ammunition and swiftly rotated her masks. Then—

"«Penetrator Yoshimasa»...!"

"Although it could be considered an extensible weapon, the attacks can be predicted to a certain extent from the main body's location."

She intercepted the spear of hair that Kuroe was stabbing from behind after nonchalantly circling over to her back. Then switching mask modes fluently, she traveled to a past position, appearing in front of Kirika. Kirika hastily extended the «Tragic Black River» while retreating but could not evade completely. Kotetsu left a cut on her upper arm. Only by tossing an execution stake was Fear able to barely stop Nirushaak from following up the attack on Kirika.

"Damn it! That mask is too troublesome. There should be limits on how weird curses can get...!"

"This mask was inherited by each generation of a clan tasked with a special mission. That clan served as chieftains, mystics for divining the past, oracles for predicting the future as well as shamans for knowing the present, they were warriors for protecting everything. In other words, beings equivalent to gods."

Nirushaaki swapped masks again with one shake of her head. This time she augmented her strength and attacked Fear.

"«Ionyomott of the Past»—«This spirit knows the past leading to the future»"

"Guh! Gods, you say...?"

"It is a type of concept. The wearer would ingest homemade narcotics, entering a state akin to drunkenness, answering when someone asked about the future, answering when someone asked about the present, answering when someone asked about the past. In the tribe, everything said by him as god was absolute. Even if what he said did not come true, action would be taken afterwards to turn his words into the truth. This made it equivalent to perfectly describing the present, past and future—Hence, this tool became the mask that knows everything."

Fear fought with all her strength while glaring viciously at the mask.

"Totally... nonsen... sical! After seeing it up close, I know it's also giving off a cursed smell just as ugly! The smell is totally disgusting!"

Using a momentary opening, Fear slid the drill over Kotetsu's blade, using the sliding trajectory directly to stab at Nirushaaki's abdomen. But of course, under «Wounded Knee Massacre»'s action, there was no effect at all. Not even a drop of blood was bled, simply piercing her body without resistance. This unusual sensation made Fear lose balance at little, allowing Nirushaaki the chance to counterattack.

"Of course it was cursed. The nightmares suffered by the owners after ingesting narcotics, the resentment from the defeated enemies and the people who suffered losses due to the god's predictions—They all cursed!"

Fear tried her best to block using the hatchet in her other hand. Nirushaaki and Fear forcefully bounced off each other as though exploding then readjusted their stances.

"Because it is a mask capable of seeing through everything, it carries a curse causing a slow loss of vision in the owner; because it is a mask capable of dialogue with spirits, it carries a curse that hungers for narcotic drugs. To be honest, compared to the rare abilities they confer, these curses are totally insignificant."

"Wrong. Curses are ultimately inauspicious. If you have to get them in exchange for strength, then you shouldn't consider cost-effectiveness anymore!"

Within Haruaki's view, a battle scene persisted, beyond what common sense could imagine.

Nirushaaki disappeared and reappeared, frequently switching between mask modes without leaving a single opening. After teleporting and delivering a strike she would then escape at high speed. Using prescience of future positions, she completely guarded her back against ambushes coming from behind. Even if an opening could be seized, she would then make an emergency escape to a former position.

Dancing back and forth between existence and disappearance, she was completely like a ghost. That overwhelming arm strength was like that of a monster. The two unworn masks on the sides of her head formed protrusions, almost looking like the outlines of horns.

Was this the reason?

Haruaki remembered. About what others had called her. What Lilyhowell and others had called her.

—Battle Demon.

An elusive demon of battle. An existence that simply thirsted for battle.

Confronting such an enemy, what was he able to do?

(Just now... I almost lost my life, even.)

He knew at least that much. However, for some reason, his hands still had strength. He was also able to ignore the pain on his shoulder. His body had not gone limp yet.

(I must step up. No matter what, I can't flee with my tail between my legs at a moment like this...!)

Apart from that, although he had no idea whether he could succeed or not...

Nevertheless, he still held a trump card that he had not told anyone about.

Haruaki adjusted his grip on the sword. Fear and the others were fighting desperately. The enemy was very strong to begin with and even had Konoha as a weapon. Together with the shirt that rendered all attacks ineffective, this left only the arms and legs as possible attack targets. This battle was absolutely not easy. As long as I can help cover them slightly—Just as Haruaki was searching for an advantageous position, trying to move surreptitiously—

"I already knew you were going to move there."

"Crap...!"

Nirushaaki suddenly changed the direction of her attack. Naturally, Haruaki had been avoiding her past positions all along, but there was nothing he could do if she predicted his movements and charged over. He watched as she came closer and closer.

"Allow me to confirm. After all, thou succeeded in blocking my blade once. Come come."

"Uh... Urgh... Guh...!"

Haruaki retreated while desperately using the «Toxic Sword Poison Ritter» to engage Konoha's blade. He could feel that she was holding back greatly. Otherwise, his skills as an amateur could not possibly have defended at all.

"Hmm, an amateur verily..."

"But his eyes intrigues me greatly. Those eyes have not lost hope."

"Haruaki!" "Yachi!"

"—Since Lilyhowell has not made a move, you should be able to handle them on your own. Kotetsu? Hold them off for now."

"Affirmative."

Haruaki could see Kotetsu appear behind Nirushaaki, totally naked, facing off against Fear and the others. This was quite a terrible situation. He was totally isolated from the group.

"Get lost!"

"Yachi, you must hang in there! We're going to rescue you straight away... «Tragic»!"

"Haru!"

The three girls sprang into action simultaneously, but Kotetsu was no pushover. Brandishing his palms with curved fingers—in other words, tiger claws—he severed the belt, severed hair and blocked Fear's torture instruments.

"Truth be told, you are underestimating this Kotetsu. You would best recall the situation during the school excursion. Without Muramasa-sama's assistance, could you lot have defeated me?"

"Shut up! You're so in the way, get lost—!"

Fear's angry snarling and the sound of collisions between solid objects could be heard, but Haruaki no longer had the luxury to spare any attention towards that direction. Right in front of him was Nirushaaki and Konoha in her hand.

"Well, then since you have not abandoned hope, that sword apparently holds some sort of power. Probably a power that could reverse the situation in a single strike... For example, a cursed ability that could send

me to my death or immobilize me from a mere scratch. It can produce electrical currents? Release flames? Spew poisonous fluids? Turn me into an idiot? Or something else?"

Haruaki was greatly shocked but tried hard not to let it show on his face.

"Shall I destroy it?"

"No. Once deprived of his last hope, perhaps this confrontation will end. I believe that would be too much of a shame. This boy stands before me with resolve, prepared for death. As a show of respect towards his determination, allow me to serve personally as his opponent."

"A man of such worth he is?"

"I have heard that this boy—Yachi Haruaki—possesses a constitution immune to curses. Although it would sound like some kind of fictional plot, perhaps he might be able to release a hidden power on the verge of death. To this end, he ought to be allowed to keep a sword in hand at least."

"Very well, since master hath spoken. I shall obey. Then please handle as appropriate."

Was Konoha the one moving the blade? Or was it Nirushaaki? It did not matter either way. Merciful attacks kept arriving. Haruaki desperately blocked, dodged and endured, but he could not endure everything. Every time he failed to block, Konoha's blade ran across his body again and again. He could feel a slippery liquid slowly covering his entire body. Difficult to move. Nausea. Simply breathing was causing certain wounds to throb with pain.

—The enemy was toying with him.

"Haruaki, Haruaki, Haruaki! Get lost, get lost, get lost, you—!"

"«Tragic», «Tragic», «Tragic Black River»!"

"Underestimating me, only aiming for the prize—Logic dictatest that such laxity cannot possibly defeat this Nagasone Kotetsu Nyuudou Okisato!"

Haruaki's field of vision was growing narrower and narrower. Was he bleeding too much? He could no longer tell which parts of his body were injured and which were not. However, the incredible thing was that he could still hear voices properly.

"Hmm. By this juncture, I am starting to feel baffled. By the way, what is it that you desire, enabling you to stand before me all this time?"

"Isn't it... obvious...? Return Konoha... to us..."

"Even if you kill me, your goal cannot be achieved. The one you knew no longer exists."

Impossible. Absolutely unacceptable. Indeed. Their original idea was...

Perhaps there was no need to tell the enemy specifically. But by now, Haruaki no longer had any spare effort to prevent his thoughts from rushing out of his mouth.

"We... know. It's called «Bartolomey Oblivion», right... The mask you used on Konoha. Since it can rewind memories... It must have the function to restore them..."

"Oh? I am not certain, but indeed, I cannot assert that no such function exists. Perhaps it might be possible to induce a memory recovery function."

See, I knew it! Haruaki felt sudden heat in the depths of his chest, almost seemingly accompanied by a small surge of strength.

However...

Upon hearing what Nirushaaki said next—

"—That is all hypothetical assuming it had not yet turned into the remains of what used to be a mask."

"Huh?"

The slight surge of strength instantly flowed in reverse. As the illusion of new hope was dispelled, even the last lingering strength in his body dissipated without trace together with the reverse flow. What had this woman said just now?

"You're... lying..."

"Having accomplished its mission, that thing was no longer of use. If you succeed in defeating me, you can very well go ahead and confirm for yourself. It is kept in the trash can in the corner room on the second floor."

She did not appear to be lying at all. Haruaki had no choice but to believe that «Bartolomey Oblivion» was already destroyed, no matter how reluctant he was to admit it.

"Huff... Ah... Huff...!"

With that, the last ray of hope for retrieving Konoha's memory was lost.

Nirushaaki still did not stop attacking. Haruaki's entire body was covered repeatedly by a hot liquid.

Nevertheless, in spite of these conditions—Incredibly, his body still contained some slight strength.

Namely, the simple notion of "I can't flee from here." A baseless belief that "once I leave this place, everything will be over."

Relying on this single remaining reason to support his legs, he faced forward and continued to stand.

Despite the pain and aching spreading through his entire body and the gradually narrowing field of vision...

Despite signs that Konoha and Nirushaaki were beginning to grow tired of the simple act of toying with him...

"Seriously... Is he nothing more than a boy who cannot be cursed?"

"Apparently so. How boring—That said, his fresh blood is of excellent color, a welcome sight for the eyes. But 'tis his only merit."

Nirushaaki remarked in disappointment. Apart from disappointment, Konoha's voice carried sadistic glee as though she were toying with a small animal.

Haruaki stumbled, his legs unsteady. Even so, now was not yet time to fall.

Hence, he might as well smile.

"Oh my... Haha, I wouldn't be so sure if I were you. Perhaps I really do have a hidden power. Through that power, everything will be achieved smoothly. So, play with me a little longer..."

"Verily a bizarre brat. Out of the kindness of my heart, I have already avoided fatal injuries, but he ought to suffering unbearably. If thou wouldst beg me, I could serve thee instant liberation."

"These little injuries... are nothing..."

Using his hazy head, using his unsteady head, he looked at Konoha while simply moving his lips to say:

"Konoha, you should know too, right? I'm unexpectedly prone to getting hurt. So I'm already used to it. I've got many old scars on my body too. They're just not obvious, but if you look closely, there's actually a lot. The biggest one is... Right right, it's the wound on my head that time, isn't it? Do you still remember? Konoha..."

"..."

"Back when I was really just a child... It really came as a great shock..."

Indeed, he could still remember.

What happened back then.

Forever impossible to forget, his memories with Konoha—

Part 6

The headache and discomfort still had not subsided.

Despite the cold wind blowing near the sky, it made no difference.

She was standing on the pinnacle of a giant tree growing in the garden, frowning at the discomfort shrouding her entire body, meanwhile gazing down at the scenery below. The Japanese house where she had lived for the past few weeks. The residence whose door plate read "Yachi."

Before I leave, I should have a look at this house's full view, she thought. Sad? No—This was merely something akin to a memento There was no additional meaning apart from that.

"Hey~!"

"...Tsk."

She originally intended to stand there briefly but had accidentally spaced out for too long, apparently. Clicking her tongue while looking down, she found a boy next to the tree's roots. He was looking up at her, cupping his hands to his mouth to project his voice.

"What are you doing~? Dad said to try as much as possible to avoid letting outside people see you, right~? If you stand in that kind of place, you'll be seen clearly..."

"I shall be going out."

She interrupted him, declaring in a commanding tone of voice. Almost looking straight down, she found him looking extremely small. His mouth was gaping while he stared, apparently unable to understand what she had said.

"Of course, 'tisn't going out for amusement. Rather, this implieth I shall not return to this house."

"Wait... W-Why!?"

"I am not staying here out of some particular reason. In that case, 'tis just as possible that I leave for no particular reason—Besides, mine original intent was simply to try living here several weeks. In other words, I have merely grown weary of this place."

Her headache intensified. An unbearable discomfort was occupying the depths of her abdomen. She suppressed it desperately, preventing it from showing on her face. She knew the cause. Those of her kind would experience suffering when trying actively to leave their owner—as long as one was a tool rather than human, this was only natural.

But no matter. She was not going to let her pace get dragged down by something like this.

Somehow there was a feeling that her headache and discomfort stemmed from another reason, but she subconsciously suppressed it. In any case, she wanted to leave. That was all. She wanted to do it.

"W-Wait! Aren't you going to lift your curse?"

"Have I ever said anything of that sort? Thy father and thou art the only ones saying so."

"That's... umm... but—Hold up, could you wait first! Come down first!"

Seeing him plead so urgently, she found it ludicrous. Sneering coldly, she said:

"Ha. I have said that I am leaving. Wherefore must I stay? If thou wishest to stop me, thou shouldst climb up here."

"...!"

Hence, he walked over to the giant tree and reached out with his tiny hands. He really started to climb the tree unaided. Quite astonished, she could only gaze down to watch him.

He desperately extended his short arms and legs, grabbing protruding branches or burrs on the tree trunk, climbing up bit by bit. That face of his was looking straight at her.

She looked downwards at him, unable to move. This tree was too tall for a child. There was no way he could climb up here, probably. He was going to fall sooner or later. Definitely fall. As expected, he lost balance. But at the last second, he caught another branch. A breath of relief. Whose breath of relief? He started climbing up again. He was willing to go so far just to stop her from leaving? Why? He could not possibly climb up here. Why? Why was he staring at her with those resolute eyes, as though he would never let go ever again once he caught her? Why did he continue to force his body to climb despite the sweat drenching his back? This was definitely no easy task for a child's muscles. She could see his arms and legs trembling. She could see the red of fresh blood seeping from scratches and cuts on his palms caused by burrs—

"Guh...!"

Something jumped in her heart. The persistent headache intensified. Nausea. Discomfort. Headache again. Her head felt like it was about to split open. Irritated. She felt incurably irritated. Whether towards the way his eyes looked or towards this headache.

During this time, he finally arrived at her feet. Poking his head forward, he smiled proudly as though saying "See? I climb up here"—

"Urghhhh...!"

The headache further intensified. It was as though tectonic shifts were happening in her brain. Her sense of balance was suddenly disrupted. So painful. So tormenting. Pulverize it. Pulverize it. If it could eliminate this pain, she would rather abandon her head. So it would be best to pulverize it. It would be best to smash her head violently then pulverize it—!

She was able to steady her footing if she wanted. However, she did not want to do so.

Indeed. Even if she fell headfirst like this, she could not possibly die. Her skull could not possibly split open. After all, she was a cursed tool. She simply prayed, hoping this simple yet merciless impact could drown out the headache that was almost driving her insane.

Hence—

She deliberately gave into her disrupted sense of balance, tossing her body into the air.

A sense of floating, followed by a feeling of falling.

Cure it. Cure it. Cure it. Cure it!

She closed her eyes and entrusted her body to gravity, simply praying for this matter.

Nevertheless, what she heard at this time was a voice she completely did not expect.

"Watch out!"

She could not help but open her eyes. This time, she saw a scene that she completely did not expect as well. She saw a scene that could not possibly be witnessed.

For the sake of an inhuman object's insignificant fall...

Unbelievably, the child, who could not be more ordinary, had jumped into the air to save her.

...Then the result was as natural as one could expect.

She watched that scene silently without saying a word.

The soil of the garden dyed red. Bleeding from his head, he was lying there unmoving.

Back then, what she had felt was—

However, her answer was very brief.

"No idea."

Then she sliced with a cut slightly sharper than previously. As a result, a cut appeared on the boy's thigh, slightly deeper than the previous wound. As though losing all strength in an instant, he finally collapsed on his knees.

Ahead of Kotetsu behind her, the sorrowful screams of Fear-in-Cube and the other girls could be heard. Although these voices reached his ears, the meanings probably failed to be transmitted into his brain—Nirushaaki thought. Yachi Haruaki's eyes were looking dazed and out of focus. Clutching the black sword of unknown powers, his hand was also shaking. The sword's tip touched the ground and did not rise again.

Nirushaaki extended Muramasa in her hand right in front of him in his kneeling state.

"I believe this is enough. End this, shall we?"

"Master, thou art the one who started this. I have no objections."

"Well then..."

Even if it had happened by chance, he probably could not block this sword again like just now. He no longer had the strength, to the point that even lifting the sword was impossible.

This is the end—certain in this belief, Nirushaaki was just about to thrust Muramasa into his heart when...

But just an instant before that could happen—

"Gah... U-Urghhhhhh!"

He was the first to move. He did not move his trembling arm. He did not move the hand that was holding the sword. Neither did he move his legs. Neither could he stand up. However, he could at least lean his body forward—

"What!?"

Even Nirushaaki could not but exclaim in surprise.

To think he would voluntarily press his shoulder against the tip of Muramasa's blade, causing Muramasa to pierce his flesh.

"Brat, what art thou doing...!?"

"Urgh... Ah..."

He did not respond to Muramasa's questioning. Bending his waist slightly, he leaned his body even more forward. Stabbed into his shoulder, the blade almost pierced all the way through. What was he doing? Was he mad? No wait—?

Nirushaaki instantly stepped on his hand that was holding the sword. Although she did not think that his trembling hand was capable of raising the sword, plus the fact he was wielding the sword in his right, the same side as the pierced shoulder, it was better to be safe than sorry.

—Now there was no problem. No matter what this boy's intentions, all that remained was...

At this moment, Nirushaaki suddenly noticed.

A certain object was currently slicing open his right arm and emerging from within.

This was his final hidden trump card.

"«Returning Kukri of Childbirth»...!"

This was the cursed knife that Kururi used to carry, cursed to burrow into the owner's flesh, slowly making its way towards the heart.

Thank you, Kururi—Haruaki whispered in his heart. I was reminded only thanks to your text message. This thing has been kept in the storeroom all this time, waiting for its curse to slowly dispel. I guess this is what people call 'in for a penny, in for a pound.' After all, since I've prepared myself to be cursed, I might as well try using everything that's available—

To be honest, using it almost made him frown, of course. This was originally Kururi's possession—Finally thrown by Bivorio, the knife had damaged Aiko's body. But Haruaki knew. Aiko was still alive. Waiting for the day to revive. Hence, this was not the murder weapon that had killed Aiko. Hence, at the last moment, he permitted himself to use it... Of course, he had also explained the situation to Aiko when taking away the knife

from the storeroom, bowing respectfully before leaving. Although there was no response, he believed she was surely listening.

While he willingly endured the feeling of the curse and the pain of a foreign object bursting out of his flesh, these thoughts ran through his mind.

"I won't be cursed, but I can still make use of the curse's power. People who think I can't use them and get careless... surprisingly, they do exist for real..."

In terms of actual time, it probably took merely a few seconds, but Haruaki spent what felt like an eternity for his body before the «Returning Kukri of Childbirth» appeared from his right arm. Then grabbing the knife with his left hand, he stabbed towards Nirushaaki's arm.

Any part of the body not covered by «Wounded Knee Massacre» could be pierced with the blade. Even if all he managed to do was injure her arm, it would not be totally meaningless. If he could immobilize one of her arms, many options would open up. The situation would also shift greatly to their advantage.

Extremely near. Nirushaaki's mask was the one simulating a smiling face... Probably guarding against Fear and the others behind her, she had been using the future prediction mode all this time. Was he going to make it if she immediately tried to switch to the evasive mode for returning to the past? Hard to say. But by this point already, all he could do was bite the bullet and go ahead. Go. I have to make it in time!

Then he stabbed the knife with its characteristically inward curving blade towards Nirushaaki's arm—

"Perhaps 'tis unnecessary meddling... But I am still putting a stop to this."

But Haruaki did not succeed.

Taking on human form, Konoha was standing next to him, gripping the «Returning Kukri of Childbirth»'s blade in her hand. Probably because her sword tip was originally stabbed into his shoulder, her other hand remained pierced in his flesh still in a knifehand posture.

"Ah..."

"Hmm. No matter what, it is all futile."

Standing behind Konoha, Nirushaaki also raised her hand, intending to snatch the «Returning Kukri of Childbirth» away with her bare hand. Regardless whether she was going to succeed for real or not, she was undoubtedly calm and composed in attitude.

The shoulder where Konoha's knife hand was embedded was hurting greatly. She could probably slice deeper into the center of his body any time she wanted. She could probably kill him effortlessly.

Despite knowing that clearly, Haruaki still laughed.

"Haha..."

"Wherefore art thou laughing? Clearly, thy final trump card, the one thou took such pains to prepare, hast gone to waste. Thou wishest to die? Or perhaps, laughing is the only thing thou canst do now?"

"It didn't... go to waste."

Following the motion of stabbing with the «Returning Kukri of Childbirth», Haruaki just managed to straighten his body that had been bent slightly at the waist. Compared to being toyed with one-sidedly just now, slight progress had been made.

"Because of this knife... I am now able to... see you in real life like this, not in your sword form—I have successfully made a step of progress. Compared to just now... much closer..."

There was a reason why it was necessary to pour all his effort into taking this step.

Also, talking to her in this form was also very important.

"What art thou talking about?"

Konoha frowned, stabbing her hand deeper. Haruaki felt so painful that it seemed like the depths of his body were being stirred, causing tears to flow. That said, tears had already flowed earlier. In other words, he was currently laughing and crying at the same time. How unsightly.

"Stop it, stop it stop it stop it! Cow Tits, unforgivable, I won't forgive you!"

"Get... out of the way—now—!"

"Haru! Run away, Haru!"

He could everyone's voices. Some kind of thunderous crash. Click click clack clack bang. What happened. Fear was making beast-like groans. He hoped Fear would not turn into her scary self again. Kirika's breathing was far too quick, almost like sobbing. This could very well be his first time hearing Kuroe speak in such an urgent voice.

However, engaged with the girls in battle, Kotetsu also expressed his relentless determination.

"Guh... Urgh... Ohhhhh—! I am also resolved to guard position as commanded! Truth be told, until I breathe my last dying breath, I shall not allow you to pass!"

Another deafening crash. The sound of clashing between Kotetsu and Fear's group.

Behind Konoha, Nirushaaki went "hmm" and turned her head slightly to look at them, as though watching a show. Haruaki felt very fortunate that Nirushaaki did not go over to interfere. She had also moved away her foot that had been stepping on his hand. However, with the poisoned sword barely hanging on the tip of his little finger, he was in no condition to swing it at all. Neither was he able to lift it up.

With a laughing and crying expression, Haruaki simply gazed at Konoha—

Part 8

Lilyhowell was staring blankly at the black sword hanging on Haruaki's hand—the sword she had explained to them as the «Toxic Sword Poison Ritter». Listening.

In order to save his life, Fear and the other girls were screaming hoarsely, pleading, roaring, struggling desperately. Listening to all this, Lilyhowell thought... Clearly he should just flee.

...Although Yachi Haruaki's death was an expected development.

However, under these kinds of circumstances, even if he tried to escape, it would make little difference to the result. Clearly if he begged for mercy pathetically and fled, he might be able to survive at least.

(But... to me, it is of no consequence.)

She stood there unmoving, suppressing her presence, biding her time. Rash action would render all her efforts naught.

Indeed, Yachi Haruaki had already served 80% of his purpose, just as could be gathered from Nirushaaki's words earlier. Making Nirushaaki believe that the sword possessed a cursed ability capable of deciding victory by inflicting a single scratch was of paramount importance. Making her believe that this was the Wathe's purpose.

Having achieved this objective, all that was left to do was wait.

Since Yachi Haruaki did not intend to escape, then the instant when he completed the final 20%—in other words, the instant for her to take action—

As expected, it could only be the instant of his death.

Part 9

Seeing his crying and laughing expression, Konoha looked like she could not help but feel baffled. She went as far as to twist her knife hand, pierced in his shoulder, stimulating the wound while she spoke:

"Bizarre brat... Doth this not hurt?"

"Haha. As long as it grants my wish, pain is nothing. Compared to the pain of a wish that cannot come true, it doesn't hurt at all... But places that hurt will still hurt after all. In the end, the wish itself is pain, isn't it?"

Even Haruaki did not know what exactly he was talking about. However, his lips continued to speak as though there was no alternative. Konoha's hand twisted in his shoulder again. "Ahahah." Making a sound resembling both a cry and a laugh, he straightened his back. This apparently displeased Konoha, causing her to frown with eyes that showed her inability to comprehend the sight in front of her.

"See, this ought to be very painful, yes!? How incomprehensible. Try begging for thy life, brat!"

"Ahhh, the wish really is pain... Hey Konoha... Do excessively strong wishes count as curses?"

"What?"

"Feeling it for real with my own body, I think I finally understand. Not just paying lip service, but feeling it for real. Behind this wish, that feeling of hopelessly resenting everything in the world, that's a curse. It must be like that... Yeah, this must be very lonely. Sad, painful, helpless—It's better not to have this feeling. I really want to dispel it. I really prefer not getting cursed in the first place. Come home. So, please. Konoha. Come home. Konoha—"

His mind finally started getting hazy. Perhaps he was speaking in broken fragments. His brain functions for deciding on these matters had already stopped working.

As though saying "you've said enough!", Konoha could be seen baring her fangs and snarling angrily:

"Stop addressing me with that unfamiliar name again and again! 'Tis most vexing, I have never heard of it!"

"No no no, you should know it, right? What are you talking about? Because..."

However, Haruaki only knew that she was speaking nonsense. That was why, amidst delusions of feeling like he was enveloped in the smell of blood, the smiling element in his expression deepened.

It was even tinged with a bit of pride.

"—That's the name I chose for you."

Part 10

After the accident on the tree last time, as well as the conversation on the roof following that, several days passed—

"A-Are you okay..."

As repeated many times previously before, he went to make another round in the garden again, sighing. He reached out and tried to open the door, but it still could not be opened, probably barred from within with a rod.

The opening of this door is forbidden until I walk out on my own—Saying that, she had shut herself away in the storehouse. Several days had passed already. What on earth was she doing inside?

"Sigh..."

And he had so many things he wanted to report to her... He sighed again. She had not mentioned the specific number of days. A couple of days? Would it take several weeks? Even longer...?

Had he said something weird on the roof? He pondered. She was looking quite strange at the time. But he was glad that she was willing to stay in this home.

"I'm home~ It really breaks my heart to press the doorbell but have no one show up to greet me... Oh, Haruaki, you're over there? What are you doing?"

Having gone on a trip without saying a word as usual, his father happened to return at this time. Rustling as he rubbed his unkempt beard, he was tilting his head in puzzlement after seeing Haruaki pacing back and forth in front of the storehouse.

"Oh, you've returned, dad. Actually—"

Just as he was about to explain the whole story...

He heard the storehouse door open with a clack. He frantically looked back and was rendered speechless.

Naturally, the one standing there was her. But for some reason, she was giving off completely different vibes.

The airs of a solitary beast were totally withdrawn. Gone without trace was also the sharpness that felt as though it would slice him upon contact.

Cheerfully like a gentle older sister, she was smiling tenderly.

"Ara. Haruaki-kun."

"????"

Haruaki shuddered and swiftly backed away. He neither felt horrified nor afraid. It was just that the sense of contradiction was too powerful. This gentle voice was too different from before. Clearly there was no change in appearance or actual voice, she was clearly herself, but the impression given was almost like a different person's.

He mustered his courage and called out in trepidation:

"U-Uh...?"

"Yes. Haruaki-kun, what is it?"

"No, I just wanted to ask you what happened? It feels like you're giving a totally different impression from before..."

"Yes, how should I put this...? A makeover. That's right. This is simply a makeover."

She inclined her head and smiled. A very warm and gentle smile. Haruaki felt dizzy. It'll probably take a while to get used to... He pressed his hand against his chest over the violently beating heart.

His father was staring at her with uncharacteristic solemnity. Then presumably noticing him, she spoke:

"Ara, Honatsu-san is here too. Welcome home."

Still showing a solemn expression, the father said something that Haruaki could not quite understand.

"Mental suppression—absolute autosuggestion? Is this really okay?"

"Of course, because this is my own decision. Although this is merely a beginning after several days of overtime rushing, from now on, it will slowly, slowly reinforce... eventually to the extent that the curse will be reversed one day."

"I think it'll be a tough process too."

"As I have said, this is my own decision."

The father glanced at Haruaki's bandaged head then looked at her smile of gentleness and stubbornness. Sighing, he threw up his hands to surrender.

Although Haruaki could not quite understand their conversation, one particular word concerned him greatly so he asked:

"Hey... You mentioned curse just now, right? So you're really willing to lift your curse?"

"Indeed."

Her answer was swift and concise. Then she said the following in an unhurried manner:

"I am already your possession, Haruaki-kun. In order to lift my curse as early as possible, I will devote my best effort."

Her eyes were gentle and forthright, serving as proof of the veracity of her words better than any rhetoric.

Very warm feelings were also spreading in the bottom of his heart. At this moment, he remembered.

"Oh right, then we need what I've been talking about since a while ago! A name for you!"

"Oh~ Now that you mention it, that's true. Haruaki-kun, this really is a wonderful idea. Do you have any suggestions?"

"Uh, I've basically looked up lots of info everywhere and racked my brain over it..."

He glanced at her. Still showing a gentle expression, she said:

"Please tell me."

"Because it was quite boring while waiting for you to come out of the storehouse, I ran over to the library and looked up a lot of stuff about Muramasa. Then in those materials, there was a story about how leaves floating down a river were sliced into halves just by touching the blade because Muramasa's blade is too sharp. So—"

He suddenly felt embarrassed, worrying what to do if she rejected the name, and started to speak rapidly.

Then bowing his head and glancing at her, he said the name.

"Konoha... How's that?"

Instantly, he could not see her face. That was because she knelt down and embraced him tightly. Hence, her gentle voice sounded next to his ear.

"Yes, it is very fitting. I am overjoyed..."

"R-Really?"

"Yes. Muramasa... Konoha? I believe this is a wonderful name. Although now that I think about it, I don't quite like this family name—"

"B-But family names shouldn't be changed, right?"

"—A fair... point. So long as I have a name given by you, Haruaki-kun, there should be no problem."

She smiled blissfully then released him. His father also nodded with satisfaction.

"Very good, the name is decided as well. Then please get along well from now on. Haruaki, although she looks like an older sister at first glance, she's also like a child in terms of common sense. Best of luck to both of you."

"An older sister. Oh right, Konoha-oneechan... Hmm, then I'll call you Kono-nee from now on!"

"Kono-nee... To think I'd even receive something like a nickname. Ufufu..."

Just at that moment, the father clapped his hands and began rummaging through his front pocket.

"Oh right, I almost forgot the most important thing. I went on a trip this time to get this thing. It'd be a total joke if I forgot to hand it to you."

"This thing?"

"It's custom made. I asked a friend to make it specially. Yeah, here it is."

Hence, what the father took out from his breast pocket was—

Part 11

"What a nuisance thou art! I have already said I have never heard of it before!"

Haruaki could feel his strength rapidly draining from his hand.

The «Returning Kukri of Childbirth» fell from his clutches, striking the ground with a thud.

With that, all was lost.

There was nothing more he could use.

(...Oh, it's over... Right?)

All that was left in his view was her face.

Konoha. Konoha. A nostalgic Konoha, her face in an expression akin to that of a noble wild dog. Beautiful yet terrifying, with eyes that looked very lonely at the same time.

All sorts of thoughts and feelings were overflowing in his heart.

Thoughts recalled in the past. Thoughts that had been recalled to this date. Always together. Together all this time. Really like a true older sister. Like family. A certain existence beyond that.

Starting from their encounter until now, too much time had already passed.

As expected, the images of her face surfacing in his mind were predominantly that of her calling "Haruaki-kun" with a smile.

Therefore—

(Even if I'm killed by Konoha... I don't... mind at all...)

But I really don't want to be killed by this Konoha who's wearing an expression like that of a stranger... Haruaki thought.

This kind of face as though she had never met him before. This kind of face as though she had never shared the experiences he was reminiscing to this date.

In the end, he still wanted to see her usual face.

(Oh, that's right.)

Because he recalled the memory of choosing Konoha as her name, it also prompted him to remember something else he had forgotten. Now was the perfect moment—He thought.

In a dream-like state but not a dream—

With strange, warm feelings in his heart, he gazed at the face of his housemate, his family, his childhood friend, his older sister, the one who had always been by his side, the person whom he believed they would always stay together.

While slightly moving his trembling arm at the same time...

During this time, Konoha's hand pushed harder. As though saying her patience had worn out, she applied greater force than before. In order to

declare an end to it all, she twisted the blade deeper into his body, intending to wreck fatal destruction—Such force.

His mind preoccupied with thoughts of her before his eyes, Haruaki did not even feel the pain.

What time was it right now? Where was this again? He could no longer tell clearly.

"Konoha... Yeah, Kono-nee...? Whatever, I guess any name's fine. I... still remember our promise. We will always... forever—So you can't break the promise. Hurry... come back—"

Then he took out something from his pocket. His vision became excessively dark. But still, he desperately extended his hand that was stained red by a certain person's blood, extending that feeble and twitching hand—

If I'm going to be killed, better be that her, at least.

Better be her with the usual and familiar appearance.

Hence, he simply performed a simple action.

Then he smiled, apparently.

Thinking—Yeah, with this, that's the usual Konoha.

With all strength draining from his entire body, all words and thoughts lost meaning.

Finally, what he saw on Konoha's face was—

The nostalgic shine of transparency on the glasses his trembling hand had put on her face.

Part 12

Nirushaaki watched this ending from behind her mask.

In her view was Konoha's naked back as well as Yachi Haruaki sprawled on the ground unmoving.

Sighing, Nirushaaki bent down slightly and picked up the knife with the bent blade, fallen on the ground—She recalled it was called the «Returning Kukri of Childbirth», right?

"Goodness gracious..."

She took a step forward towards the naked back.

"What a shame. Truly what an unfortunate shame."

Then without waiting for an answer, while asking:

"...Why?"

Nirushaaki stabbed the knife directly towards the back of Konoha's head.

Her reaction was very simple. She did not raise her hand that was covered in his blood.

She simply turned her head to look back.

Even so, the cursed knife's blade failed to harm her.

Blocked by the glasses on her face, it stopped.

Not only that, the blade even started to crack open gradually, as though it could not withstand the impact.

"...This knife is the one that shatters? This too, I shall ask you. Why?"

Behind the knife's glittering remains, falling as countless fragments—

Beneath those glasses—

A pair of tear-filled eyes were glaring viciously at her.

"This is my scabbard. This is something that my past self accepted as a part of my being. Hence, a blade of this level cannot possibly penetrate me—!"

Part 13

What Honatsu presented was a pair of ordinary glasses.

"This is?"

She reached out to receive it. Instantly, there was an incredible feeling. Although the object in her hand was a pair of glasses, at the same time, it did not feel like glasses. Although there was clearly nothing unusual about its texture or appearance, she could feel that the material could not be generalized through ordinary means. Was it the smell that caused her to think that? Rather than entering through her nasal cavity, it was a smell that entered her brain directly. If anything, it was just like herself—

"That's your scabbard."

"?"

Hearing that, she looked up suddenly.

"I asked a friend to make a scabbard. This is the scabbard exclusive to you alone in the entire world. Something existing for you as a human as well as for you as a sword. Because it's custom made, it cost me quite a pretty penny."

"My... scabbard...?"

"Yeah, there's a craftsman who's willing to forge one so long as I request it as a favor. I was originally worried you might think of it as meddling, but luckily, my efforts did not go to waste. Since you're willing to lift your curse, this thing should come in handy."

Just by intuition, she could tell that Honatsu was not lying.

Her curse was the desire to see fresh blood. In other words, it was strongly tied to the sense of vision. In that case, if the scabbard capable of suppressing the curse remained on her when she took on human form—Then it would be equivalent to an item covering the field of view, like glasses.

"A scabbard. Something capable of containing my blade..."

"That's right. However, its specialty is precisely the fact that a scabbard ultimately serves to contain rather than erase the blade, that's all. Don't get the wrong idea in this regard."

"...What do you mean?"

Haruaki tilted his head and asked his father. While stroking Haruaki's head, Honatsu directed his answer to her:

"Meaning that it's not good to reject your past self too much. You are Muramasa. Although that's going to change slowly henceforth, you are still Muramasa, no question about it."

"To the point that rotting away is the only option for a sword that rejects its existence as a sword—Is that what you mean?"

"Although this is a scabbard, I was told that it was forged with such sturdiness that it can be used as an unedged blade at the same time too. It also saves the effort of needing to attack with the back of the blade."

"..."

The more carefully she looked, the more she could feel that this was an top-quality scabbard forged by a craftsman. Holding it like this in her hand, there was no sense of dissonance. It simply carried the additional meaning of progress without rejecting her identity.

Hence, she could easily imagine it. After wearing this continuously for the long term, it really would become a part of her body. It would become a part of the new Muramasa who did not kill—

As soon as she understood this point, she no longer had any hesitation.

Lightly, she put the glasses on her face. It almost felt like she was not wearing any glasses. With extreme harmony, it became a part of her face, even to the point that she was not aware of its presence.

"Haruaki-kun, how is it?"

Smiling, she asked for his comment. He answered demurely in an adorable manner:

"Hmm... Kono-nee, it looks great on you!"

Part 14

"Kotetsu! Return!"

"Gah... Muramasa... -sama...!"

Retreating, Nirushaaki converged with Kotetsu. However, Fear did care at all about that. Single-mindedly, she ran over to the collapsed Haruaki. Please. Breathe.... Heart... Please!

"Haruaki!"

"Oh~..."

She seemed to hear a feeble response. Fear was greatly surprised.

"I feel... super sleepy..."

Still sprawled, Haruaki muttered quietly towards the ground. His consciousness did not seem clear, but at least—He was alive!

"Kuroe!"

"Coming! Full power to the max—Mode: «Satisfied Yorimori»!"

"I-I'll help stop the bleeding as well!"

Letting Haruaki lie down on his back, Kuroe and Kirika began to devote their full efforts towards treating Haruaki. Although there was a lot of bleeding, in the end, the most severe wound seemed to be the shoulder's. They could only count their blessings that fortunately, the wound had not expanded towards the center of the body and had not caused fatal harm to internal organs.

But the cause of this severe injury, the person who had carved open his flesh and blood—

"..."

Completely naked, she still had her right hand covered in Haruaki's blood, her face still covered in tears—Narrowed harshly beneath those glasses, her eyes were glaring at Kotetsu and Nirushaaki.

Looking at the side of her face, Fear asked:

"How did you manage to recover?"

Without looking at her, Konoha answered calmly.

"In the brief instant just before they erased my memory, I allowed my memories to retreat to this pair of glasses and deliberately dropped it by my feet. Part of it was a hint that if I were to wear these glasses again, this could serve as the impetus to receive the memories flowing back in reverse. Although I took a gamble, it was better than doing nothing."

"That kind of thing..."

"Feasible. This is my scabbard. Having worn it for years, it's already a part of me. Hence, it's possible to entrust memories to it, at least. I've never taken it off even when sleeping and bathing. I was thinking you'd at least realize this is a scabbard."

Listening to her calm tone of voice, Fear could not help but grip her hatchet tightly. However, she knew that Konoha said this intentionally. Right now, there were more important things to do than apologizing.

Kotetsu was watching Konoha with forlorn eyes. Without changing her expression, Konoha looked back at him.

"You have... turned back."

His words carried undeniable sorrow and disappointment. A voice that sounded like it was forced out. A twisted expression.

"How could things be so... cruel. Unforgivable. Truth be told, you bastards... you bastards are the ones... who are truly Muramasa-sama's curse!"

However, as soon as Nirushaaki touched his shoulder, he regained his sense and turned back to the way he was.

"Since the wish of sharing a collective existence cannot be actualized no matter what—At the very least, by my very own hands..."

Kotetsu transformed back into a Japanese sword, held in Nirushaaki's hand.

"Finally right at the very end, what unexpected hardship... But this is also a trial along the path to the dragon. This must be overcome."

The masked woman murmured thus. Meaning she did not intend to let them go.

The enemy had lost one weapon. But on our side—Fear shifted her gaze slightly. Haruaki was unable to move. Kuroe and Kirika were fully focused on treating him. To be honest, she was all covered in wounds too. In the battle so far, in attempting to break past Kotetsu's defense, she had already exhausted all her energy. Still able to move normally was Konoha—as well as Lilyhowell, standing there motionlessly, although Fear had no idea why she was not moving at all. But there was probably no point in depending on her.

"...Any plan?"

"No idea."

«Wounded Knee Massacre»'s power still stood in their way. Now that Haruaki had fallen, it was no longer possible to use the poisoned sword that was capable of deciding victory with a single blow to an arm or a leg. It was said that Nirushaaki would die from any attack landing on her back, but she possessed the mask capable of predicting future positions of people. Even if they wanted to tie her up or circle around to her back, Kuroe and Kirika must currently focus on treatment. Even if they could bind her successfully, she was also able to escape by moving to a past position. What a desperate crisis—

"All we can do is try to get around to her back, using our willpower. Or using willpower, try our best to hack off her arms and legs that the shirt doesn't cover."

This was totally not a plan but wishful thinking. Konoha probably understood too, but did not say a word. She simply chopped the air with her hand, shaking his blood off onto the ground.

Hence, just as Fear and Konoha were about to charge at Nirushaaki—

Part 15

All that remained was how to proceed with the operation after his death.

However—Was that really it? She was unable to dispel this notion.

There were no other issues? Nothing else that could go wrong—?

(Nothing else was possible.)

Lilyhowell convinced herself. Her goal was simply to kill Nirushaaki. So long as this goal could be achieved, she had no scruples. That was all.

However...

She could not help but think. Because it was too matter-of-fact, she had not put any thought into this so far, but at this time, she could not help but think. Perhaps because of that boy she had been watching so far, those words he had said to that girl just as the aura of death was silently approaching.

A wish. A synonym for her wish and goal. In other words, killing Nirushaaki.

Then... Then—What exactly was Laurica Shoegazer's wish?

Like these people here, she had a wish she prioritized over all pain. She must have. Then no matter how little time there was remaining, Lilyhowell had to know, having loved her once for certain.

Her... Her wish, what was it—?

Part 16

A clatter was heard from behind. Fear looked back to see—

"..."

Lilyhowell was picking up the poisoned sword of black, the «Poison Ritter». Although Fear was startled to see her moving, she also felt surprise towards her action.

"H-Hey! That's the drawn blade, didn't you say that it's dangerous to hold the sword in that state! Poi... No, it'll curse you!"

Only at the last second did Fear remember that Nirushaaki and Kotetsu were also in earshot, so she hastily made her words more vague. Holding the unsheathed sword would poison the wielder. That was why Haruaki was the only one who could use it, right? But—

"—No problem."

Lilyhowell answered. Her eyes seemed quite different from before. The dark determination remained unchanged but incredible calmness had also appeared among them.

"I should be the one with the most remaining stamina. Muramasa, Fear-in-Cube, even if just an instant, create an opportunity for me to deliver a blow to the enemy—Please."

Unbelievably, this woman from the Knights' Dominion said please.

While Fear was feeling surprised again, Lilyhowell had already sprung into action first. Wielding the black sword, she charged forward. An instant was enough? But there was no time to think.

"Eh, and I was just thinking why she suddenly came back to life! Cow Tits, let's go!"

"Can we trust that person?"

"There's no time to think that much!"

As expected, Fear was still suffering from fatigue and could not move her body freely at will. Having just recovered her memories, Konoha also seemed to be having trouble connecting her brain to her body. Or perhaps, toying with Haruaki also depleted quite a lot of energy?

Only Lilyhowell, who had been resting all this time without moving, was brimming with energy, charging fiercely ahead almost recklessly.

"Tsk, I can't believe she's giving orders on her own, telling us to make an opening for her—"

Predicting the enemy's next move, Fear launched the stake of execution. When Nirushaaki halted her steps, Konoha attacked from the side, using her knife hand to engage Kotetsu for several rounds. Using this opportunity, Fear used her other Rubik's cube to attack from above Nirushaaki's head.

"Mechanism No.15 suspended type, caged form: «Highwayman's Coffin»—Curse Calling!"

"...«Rew of the Present»!"

To escape the descending metal cage, Nirushaaki shifted her position, appearing right in front of where Lilyhowell was running.

(She probably can't keep changing positions continuously. Hurry and do it...!)

But for some reason...

Lilyhowell's footwork was too naive. So naive that even a bystander could see it. Compared to the best timing for thrusting the poisoned sword, she took one extra step. Did she want to inflict the poison as quickly as possible out of impatience? Her action was too careless.

Naturally, Nirushaaki did not miss this chance.

"«Ionyomott of the Past»—«This spirit knows the past leading to the future»!"

She swiftly changed masks to switch to battle mode.

Then using her enhanced arm strength, she raised Kotetsu for a swing.

"Gahhhhhhhh!"

Accompanied by Lilyhowell's scream of pain—

Her arm, whose hand was still holding the «Toxic Sword Poison Ritter», spun as it flew through the air after being severed from her shoulder.

Part 17

Pain. Intense pain. Suffering pain. Aching pain. Numbing pain. Phantom pain.

Amidst all this pain, Lilyhowell felt the right side of her body suddenly become lighter.

Then she recalled what the boy had said.

The pain of a wish that could not come true. Suffering that resembled a curse.

Indeed. Compared to that type of suffering, this pain was nothing.

Although everything had gone contrary to her initial predictions—There was still time to make corrections.

Precisely because of that—

This arm must be chopped off in this manner. An expert of Nirushaaki's level would definitely choose to chop her arm off as the most effective counterattack. Hence, Lilyhowell deliberately aimed for this timing and posture when stepping forward.

Then the final task was—

Part 18

Fear watched the scene in shock.

"Ah... Huff..."

With her right arm chopped off, Lilyhowell advanced unsteadily.

Nirushaaki did not move from her position. Hence, it looked as though Lilyhowell hugged Nirushaaki. With the opponent clearly struggling to approach her, yet the reason why Nirushaaki remained at her position was very obvious. Because there was no need to move.

Pierced through Lilyhowell's abdomen, Kotetsu's blade was protruding far out from her back.

"It is over, knight of the Knights' Dominion."

"H-Ha—"

For some reason, Lilyhowell laughed instead in a hoarse voice. While coughing blood from the depths of her throat.

"This is what Laurica experienced... back then..."

"...?"

Using her trembling left hand, Lilyhowell reached behind her and drew out a sword. The white sword—Fear had forgotten its name—that Haruaki had used for training. However, Lilyhowell's hand could not possibly still have strength remaining. Simply pulling the sword out of its scabbard was already a miracle. Then holding the sword, the hand dangled powerlessly.

Nirushaaki originally intended to pull Kotetsu out from Lilyhowell's abdomen to handle the situation, but then gave off vibes like she had decided there was no need to do that—

In contrast—Lilyhowell was giving off vibes that said "everything needed to be done is now done."

Then she grinned.

"Laurica and I... have both experienced it now. If you were left out, it would be too unfair, right...?"

Instantly, Nirushaaki felt a chill instinctively.

After chopping off Lilyhowell's arm, she had immediately switched masks to «Tutasgai of the Future» in order to guard her back. Using semi-transparent images, this ability displayed the future positions of nearby people on her retina. Within this mask's time limit, at least within the next minute, no one could secretly get behind her. Fear-in-Cube, Muramasa, as well as the girls that were treating the boy, none of them

were positioned somewhere that could ambush her back. A sniping attack from outside her sensing range? But bullets did not work to begin with.

Nevertheless, what was with this sense of chill?

Why did this woman laugh—?

Just as she was thinking these thoughts...

Stab.

Nirushaaki felt a sword pierce deeply into her back.

"What...?"

Lilyhowell was still locked in a trembling embrace with her. Nirushaaki looked behind herself but there was not a single person there.

A certain object was holding the hilt of the black sword that had stabbed into her back—

It was only Lilyhowell's arm, which Nirushaaki had chopped off just earlier, shaking there while holding the sword.

Nirushaaki turned her face, intending to use «Rew of the Present» to escape, but failed to switch masks. For some reason, there was something wrong with her body. Her five senses had never experienced this before. Discomfort was rioting in the depths of her body.

"You..."

"Hu, hu, haa!"

Both a laugh and a painful breath. The flying black sword had not only pierced Nirushaaki but also Lilyhowell who was hugging her tightly to seal off her movements. For Lilyhowell, this was a second penetration.

Although she did not understand the details in how it worked...

But this was basically what happened. Nirushaaki comprehended.

"From the very start, you intended to sacrifice your own life in exchange for mine—?"

She felt a pulsation inside her own body. How long ago was the last time she was aware of a pulsating existence within herself? Usually, this core of her existence did not even register in her awareness. Only after shaking irregularly did she discover for the first time.

Were the people she looked down upon in the past like this as well?

Warriors, knights, people close to the dragon, people far from the dragon, people seeking the unknown, people filled with familial love, people who knew about curses, as well as people who did not know about curses.

All of them were now slumbering eternally six feet under as ashen remains.

Each one of them must have felt this—the pulsation of termination.

Becoming someone who would never know this feeling to the very end was precisely the pinnacle of the journey she sought. Well then, now that she was experiencing this pulsation, she was no longer on that path.

Indeed—She was currently falling. Her entire body was instantly enveloped by a floating feeling, simply a few seconds' buffer before she headed off somewhere else.

If one fell down on a gentle hill, it would be possible to stand up again to continue climbing up. But if one fell from a sheer cliff, everything would end all at once. Namely, the higher one climbed, the deeper one would fall.

Ever since understanding this point, to this date she had always prepared herself while advancing with her eyes focused straight ahead.

Hence, right now, since this valorous opponent had successfully attacked her back for the first time by treating her own life as a disposable weapon...

The final fate guided by her resolve was obvious, requiring no explanation.

"...Lilyhowell Kilmister... Superb..."

Then fall, proudly.

Fall to the same place as them.

Taking on the same appearance as ashen remains.

In the end, does this imply that I am still quite far away from the pinnacle leading to the dragon? —Those were her final thoughts.

With a greatly refreshing feeling, she closed her eyes under the mask.

Part 19

"N-Nirushaaki-sama!"

Taking on human form, Kotetsu forcibly appeared between Lilyhowell and Nirushaaki. His arm was now piercing Lilyhowell with a tiger-clawed hand. Shoving Lilyhowell aside without a further thought, he was just about to carry Nirushaaki's body, pierced in the back by the black sword, when—

On the other hand, Fear and the others had not forgotten what they needed to do. This opportunity absolutely must not be missed.

"Mechanism No.6 heated type, seat-included form: «Spanish Stool and Boots», Curse Calling!"

A steel chair appeared on the ground. Unlike the «German Interrogation Chair», this chair did not have spikes. That was because this instrument of torture was used to burn victims to death by heating the chair. The lower part of the chair was fitted with steel tubes for inserting the victim's feet. These were precisely the "boots"—capable of adjusting their volume to crush the bones of the feet. Water could also be poured into them to scald the feet alone. Similar tubes were also located near the hands, allowing the same treatment to be applied to the arms. If one had to describe them, those would be the "gloves."

"Also, Mechanism No.15 suspended type, caged form: «Highwayman's Coffin»!"

Not only summoning a chair with powerful restraining powers, but just in case, Fear also transformed her second emulated self, causing the steel cage to descend from midair. She was originally guarding against Kotetsu making an escape using pure brute force, but in hindsight, restraining Kotetsu turned out to be effortless seeing as he had turned his full attention towards Nirushaaki.

Using the chain of cubes, Fear controlled the positions of the "boots" and "gloves" on the chair. After ensnaring Kotetsu's hands and feet, she forced him to sit on the chair itself with a forceful pull. Accompanied by the metallic sounds, the "boots" and the "gloves" combined tightly with the chair. Then reducing their volumes, they began to constrict his hands and feet. At the same time, Fear allowed the birdcage with its hollowed bottom

to descend from above, covering the chair. Then she even exerted pressure from above.

"Guh, ooh, ahhhhhhhhh!"

"So there, although I could flatten you like this—"

Just as Fear murmured softly, she saw a figure dash towards Kotetsu. After going "hmph," she maintained the current state for now.

"Hmph—however, I'll let your own kind decide on how you should be dealt with in the end."

Raising her hand in a knifehand posture, Konoha sprinted. She could see Kotetsu getting closer and closer in view, restrained by Fear's two tools of torture. Kotetsu was fully naked like Konoha. Bleeding all over his body, he was suffering the pain of weight and the oppression of sadism.

Right now, my eyes must be extremely cold, she thought. There were too many unforgivable things this time.

Then Konoha arrived before Kotetsu. There were gaps in the steel cage, so she could easily slip her hand inside. For an instant, time seemed to stop—

Her eyes met with Kotetsu's.

Probably prepared for his own death...

His eyes looked as though he had lost his outer shell entirely, exposing certain emotions that were very weak and fragile.

"Muramasa... -sama, are you really... going to abandon me...?"

"I don't remember ever picking you up."

Konoha answered instantly with coldness. Without any hesitation, she reached her arm towards Kotetsu inside the cage.

Instead of a knifehand strike, she aimed the base of her palm towards his abdomen.

She had to sigh first before saying the following:

"However... You are the only fellow kindred that I know. You still owe me a game of Japanese chess..."

"M-Muramasa-sama, you still remember—"

Just as Kotetsu suddenly stared wide-eyed, she applied a full-strength impact with the base of her palm, rendering him unconscious.

Currently, Konoha had simply added the memories that were preserved in her glasses and did not lose her memories of the past few days. Consequently, towards these extremely recent memories of the past, she could not help but feel embarrassment and agitation that could not be dispelled.

She looked down at the unconscious Kotetsu. Destroying him was very simple. However—

Very concretely, as though it had happened yesterday, she recalled how she used to be like this in the past. Also because she had personally experienced how he was identical to her past self before she met Haruaki...

Hence, she concluded, as fellow swords, she was probably responsible for educating this child.

Part 20

Kirika cooperated with Kuroe, desperately tending to Haruaki and applying treatment. As a result of their efforts, his consciousness seemed to improve somewhat in clarity. On the other hand, Kirika also believed that he would probably suffer less if he simply passed out instead.

In any case, she was greatly relieved. For a moment, she was worried if he might really suffer a mishap. Careful to avoid others noticing, Kirika secretly wiped away the liquid flowing from the corners of her eyes.

Kirika currently had him lying on her thighs, but was too preoccupied to spare any thoughts on taking advantage of the situation. The «Tragic Black River» was difficult to tear, so she could only rip her skirt and use the strips of fabric for stopping blood. As a result, almost all of her thighs were exposed. Although it was embarrassing, there was nothing she could do.

At this time, Haruaki's head began to move. He wanted to sit up.

"Oh~ Could you... take me over there...?"

"You must stay totally still... Although I'd like to say that, you're not going to listen, right? Absolutely ridiculous..."

Time was running out. Because she understood that, Kirika also decided to move.

Positioning her neck under Haruaki's arm, she supported him to stand up. Frozen in her pose of tying hair around Haruaki's last wound, Kuroe remained motionless as though her batteries were depleted. Only now did she regain her senses and straighten her back.

"Oh my. Uh~ You want to move?"

"Yeah... H-Hey Kuroe-kun, you've gained a few strands of white hair, you know?"

It was not Kirika's imagination. Among Kuroe's always flourishing and beautiful hair, one bundle of hair had turned snow white.

"Hoeh? Oh~ Although the technique is very simple, it's because I used life force directly. After all, I used as much life force as I could to an unprecedented degree. Yeah, I guess it's unavoidable."

"Kuroe... Thank you."

"Haru, you don't need to thank me. I'm only doing what I can. For recharging my energy, I really must work seriously starting tomorrow~"

Kuroe tried her best to speak in a cheerful voice, meanwhile standing up unsteadily.

Keeping the unconscious Kotetsu restrained in the torture instruments, Fear and Konoha also gathered towards the same location.

With two large holes opened in her abdomen and an entire right arm amputated, lying on the floor was—Lilyhowell.

"A poisoned sword huh... If there were something that convenient—no matter how strong the curse, even if it would rot my body with a single swing, how could I possibly not use it..."

Staring up at the sky, Lilyhowell murmured quietly with a contented expression.

"What exactly was that sword...?"

"That sword's real name is «Olius II», which forms a pair with the white sword «Alius» that you used for training. «Olius II»'s curse compels it to kill the wielder of Alius without fail. Under conditions when both swords are unsheathed as now, the phenomenon of «Olius II» flying towards the wielder of «Alius» would happen..."

"That's why... That sword instantly flew over when you drew out the white sword."

Saying that, Fear glanced at Nirushaaki's unmoving body. Nirushaaki was pierced by the sword from behind. But it was no ordinary blow, a product of «Wounded Knee Massacre»'s curse. Hence, she could no longer move. Compared to Lilyhowell who was pierced by two swords—she had lost a certain thing even earlier.

"Indeed... Just like what happened in the Saga of Asmund the Champion-Killer I mentioned. Luckily, none of you investigated it. Fufu..."

Lilyhowell continued to speak in broken fragments. Two magic swords had appeared in that saga. Alius and Olius were two metalsmiths who were ordered to present a sword each to the king. Resenting the king, Olius had presented an inferior sword and was ordered to forge another. He forged a second sword but placed a curse upon it. A curse that would kill the king's kin wielding the sword of Alius—

"You deceived us... from the very start."

"My goal was to make use of the curse hidden in this sword. Yachi Haruaki, it was only due to your desperate efforts that the lie of the poisoned sword gained credibility. Once that was achieved, Nirushaaki would lower her guard upon your death, even if only for an instant, also forgetting the existence of the sword used in the failed operation. When that moment arrives, I would have the chance to draw this «Alius» to summon «Olius II» towards her back..."

"Just for that, you used Yachi as bait, intending to sacrifice him as a pawn? Absolutely ridiculous."

Hearing that, Kirika could not help but comment. What an absolutely ridiculous strategy.

"Ho, but once the lie had gained credibility, using my own arm apparently... also barely succeeded as a substitute..."

Her voice grew quieter and quieter. Seeing Kuroe pluck a few strands of hair, Lilyhowell moved her trembling left hand sideways as though saying "not necessary."

As though joking, she smiled and said:

"Have you forgotten? I am... a knight of the Knights' Dominion. What I hate most... are Wathes."

"In that case, why did you save me? You didn't need... to pick up this sword, right? You could have followed the initial plan and waited for my death—"

"Hmm... Yes. If I did nothing, you might have picked up the sword and stood up again. Then perhaps you would have lost your life. Just as I... predicted initially..."

"Then why didn't you do that?"

"Why? Because—"

She had realized what Laurica's wish was.

Definitely, it was to become her knight. Strong, righteous, pure white, then existing together forever—as knights.

This would be only natural.

Hence, to compensate for her cowardice and defeat at Nirushaaki's hands... Wanting to avenge the slain Laurica... Then turning back to her former self as knight. If she were to achieve these objectives, Laurica would probably smile at her. She believed this was part of Laurica's wish.

However, to achieve her objectives, she could only think of one method.

Namely, this kind of foolish method, abandoning everything apart from the objectives.

In other words, indeed, she—

Because she was a knight, she could only make herself no longer a knight.

This contradiction was the first mistake.

Not just killing Nirushaaki but also including this matter, the fact that she was always a knight, that must have been Lauria's wish. That was the objective that she ought to be dedicating her full efforts towards achieving.

"Since I realized at the very end what I could do while I was still a knight—Of course... I had no choice but to do it."

"...?"

They were not going to understand. However, she believed that was fine.

This was her own simple regret. Plunging headlong into the thrills of vengeance, losing sight of Laurica's wish.

"Laurica probably idolized me because I am a 'righteous knight.' When she was still young, I rescued her from unjust suffering. That was me. Nevertheless, at the very end... if I were to watch a child die without intervening—Now that would truly be unworthy of being called a knight..."

"I'm... no longer a child already..."

"Ho, children are the only ones who can say those words."

Till the very end, was she the knight that Laurica believed in?

By becoming a righteous knight, was she able to compensate her failure to protect Laurica?

Probably, surely—

"Yachi... Haruaki, you said... an excessively strong wish counts as a curse?"

"Eh? Did I...? I don't quite remember... I think so."

Amidst consciousness that was gradually growing hazy, within a field of view that was gradually closing up—

Lilyhowell Kilmister chuckled wryly at the sight of him scratching his head in puzzlement.

At the same time, she thought:

Although her standpoint was different from theirs...

At least there was no need to care that much at the end.

Since she had walked here, wanting to become a righteous knight...

Then like a righteous knight...

It was probably fine to throw them words that resembled a blessing for the future—

"In that case—My curse is hereby lifted now. Yes, lifting a curse... Truly what a comfortable and pleasant feeling..."

Part 21

A world of silence persisted for quite a while.

However, footsteps then appeared. Two groups appeared, each consisting of a pair.

One pair was dressed in lab coats, a dark-skinned girl accompanied by a young girl wrapped in bandages.

The other pair was a petite girl with hair styled into buns together with a caped cursed house.

They had emerged almost simultaneously, approaching from opposite directions. As though surrounding Haruaki's group in the center, they both stopped walking almost simultaneously.

"My statement: I are here only for cleaning up and showing ourselves. I report this kind of truth."

"What a coincidence, Satsuko and Fourt are the same~ Then let's not interfere with each other this time."

"Yes."

The dialogue stopped there. Then as though unaware of each other, the two sides began to take action.

Satsuko and Fourteen walked over to Nirushaaki's corpse.

"To think even Nirushaaki-sama would also... Ah, sure enough, «Wounded Knee Massacre» is destroyed. The «Three Masks» still seem usable—"

"Fighting normally while using willpower to suppress a state of drug intoxication, that alone is already extraordinary. Constitution is probably a

crucial factor as well. I believe that it is something only the esteemed «Wings» could control... You'd better give up."

"Okay okay. Then Kotetsu... Oh~ It's impossible to retrieve him too. Like a princess imprisoned in a cage. A-Also, fully naked for some reason. Hawawa, i-it feels too obscene, Satsuko's heart is pounding hard..."

"Calm down. Anyway, we have not received orders compelling us to retrieve him by force. Let's call it a day after finishing what tasks are possible."

"Y-You're right. Fourt, I'm counting on you."

Under Fear and the others' slightly wary gazes, Fourt covered Nirushaaki's corpse using her cape. Then when she lifted the cape again, the corpse was gone. Probably stored inside her body—Just like what she did to Yume last time.

Fear could only glare at them sharply. Most likely noticing her gaze, after finishing their task, Satsuko smiled with subtle meaning at them.

"Hi~ Fear-san and the others. You've really achieved something extremely amazing. Who could have thought that even Nirushaaki-sama would meet defeat at your hands..."

"We didn't defeat her. If anyone—it was a knight who defeated her."

"But actually, we were watching from the sidelines the whole time, so we know that's not all. That's why Satsuko wants to say again, you've really achieved something extremely amazing. There are three reasons."

Satsuko raised three fingers towards them. Then bending her fingers one by one, she said:

"One, number two is dead. Two, the Commander is making his way here now. Three, the right to challenge is promoted by one level—That's all! See, do you begin to feel you've done something extremely amazing?"

"I can't stand this. It's totally got nothing to do with us."

Fear answered coldly, causing Satsuko to contract her shoulders sadly.

"Even if you don't think that way, but then again—Yeah, whatever. Then we'll take our leave today! Fourt, let's go."

Satsuko and Fourteen turned around to leave. Fear's group did not intend to chase after them. Neither did they have the energy to do so.

On the other hand, Un Izoey and Amanda were silently gazing down at Lilyhowell whose eyes were shut.

After a while, Un Izoey turned her gaze to the side and asked Amanda.

"...Have you seen her before?"

"Yes. Although, no direct cooperation before, she is very famous, hence, appearance is known..."

"Is that so? Then must be treated carefully."

Un Izoey murmured quietly then carried Lilyhowell on her back. Using the scabbards to lift the tips of swords, Amanda re-sheathed «Alius» and various other swords, then picked up Lilyhowell's arm.

The two of them did not speak much. Fear and the others simply watched their actions without saying a word.

But before they left, Un Izoey spoke up.

"...Really sorry this time."

"You don't need to apologize at all. Rather, you told us a lot of information, so it was really a great help."

Hearing Haruaki's reply, she continued to hang her head apologetically, simply waving her gray hair lightly.

Finally, Un Izoey exchanged glances with Amanda, then nodding at Fear's group to take her leave, she started walking. After a slight delay, Amanda also nodded the same way and followed Un Izoey.

The group saw them off silently. But after walking for a while, Un Izoey looked back and asked as though remembering something:

"Oh right, we can get prize."

"...Prize?"

Why did she suddenly say something incomprehensible? Fear and company simply tilted their heads but Un Izoey also did the same. After pondering for a moment, she finally said:

"For atonement—Let us do that. Right now, what is the unknown that you wish to know the most?"

Even after hearing this question, they still remained frozen like statues.

However, without looking at their expressions, she spoke by herself in comprehension:

"...My conclusion, understanding what a truly ridiculous question it is."

Then without looking back again, she departed with Amanda.

Epilogue

Part 1

She watched that scene silently without saying a word.

The soil of the garden dyed red. Bleeding from his head, he was lying there unmoving.

Back then, what she had felt was—

In order to deceive herself about that feeling, she had thought to herself.

(I-Is he an idiot...?)

In order to rescue her from jumping off the tree, he had jumped without hesitation at all.

The gesture sounded very touching, but it was completely futile. Of course. An ordinary child could not possibly rescue her. They would simply get entangled and fall to the ground together. He was only going to serve as a human cushion to soften the impact—no, even becoming a cushion completely was not possible. In other words, it was no different from ordinary suicide by jumping off a building.

Too foolish—She could not help but think that.

She glanced at his face, whose eyes still seemed to be slightly open. He was still conscious?

At this time, she remembered. A possible reason why he would do this kind of thing.

"—Thou didst this for the contract? Because thou wanted to help me, thereby becoming a true master-servant relationship?"

However, the answer he gave in a tiny voice was not the one she was expecting.

"What is a... contract...?"

"!"

He had forgotten. She was stunned speechless.

But at the same time, she understood in the bottom of her heart.

He had forgotten. This was the answer. He had truly forgotten. More than likely—he had even forgotten she was a cursed tool.

(How utterly... foolish...!)

Even if he had forgotten, she still remembered. The promise made as a joke. An oath akin to playing games with words.

However much thou helpest me, I shall repay thee accordingly—She had certainly said that.

In that case, how should she repay this level of folly?

This folly of putting himself on the line to save her, for the sake of rescuing a cursed tool from an insignificant fall. Confronted with such massive folly, did she have anything to repay him—?

"Urgh... Nnnnnn..."

Then—

With his head bleeding, he moved his body slightly. The blood became even clearer in view.

She noticed the fluttering of her heart. This was not worry about whether he could be saved. Absolutely not.

Precisely because she harbored such lofty pride, she was unable to deceive herself regarding the thoughts in her heart.

Admit it.

Right now, I am...

Stirring under the effects of passion.

(Ooh...)

Originally forgotten, her headache reawakened. At the same time, she understood.

This was the unsettling answer to that unanswered question.

Even when in the possession of a human who was immune to curses, her cursed "nature" remained unchanged. The desire to see fresh blood did

not disappear. She had been subconsciously sealing this desire away. But now, she had passed her limit. The headache was proof of that.

Wanting to leave this home was possibly due to this reason as well. As the desire to see blood increased, higher and higher, she subconsciously suppressed it, but unable to suppress it fully, it was manifesting in the form of a headache—Which was why her only choice was to leave this home.

"H-Haha, truly... shameful."

Holding her head, she felt an uncontrollable urge to laugh, so she laughed. At the same time, her lower abdomen ached from the color of his fresh blood, causing her to laugh.

Truly, shameful was the only apt description. Who? Of course her cursed self. After seeing the fresh blood of this kind of child, she was feeling aroused.

"Ha... Clearly I was the one who put forward the contract... How is this a proud sword...? How is this weary of chopping people? Seriously... simply a wild beast. A wild beast that is satisfied so long as there is food..."

How ugly—She could not help but think.

She could feel so poignantly how pure he was and how filthy she was.

Truly—a total mismatch.

To the point that she felt ashamed.

(Well then... What exactly... ought I do...?)

Somewhere deep in her heart, she seemed to know the answer already.

Part 2

After Satsuko and Un Izoey's groups departed the scene—

Haruaki and Konoha were gazing at each other. Currently, she had already picked up and wore the kimono she had dropped. Because it was only one piece of clothing, there was a sense of vulnerability but at least it was better than being naked.

For some reason, Haruaki could feel a very oppressive pressure coming from Konoha's eyes and could not look away.

"Although she deceived you into believing that sword was poisoned, Haruaki-kun, did you really have the resolve to kill Nirushaaki?"

Lying was not permitted. He answered honestly.

"—Yeah."

Konoha's eyes wavered for an instant, as though losing strength, as though she could cry any moment.

"Haruaki-kun... You must absolutely not be cursed. Because you are... our goal."

"I'm... not that special, okay."

"You are very special. Compared to us... you are absolutely not the same!"

Konoha added more pressure to her tone of voice then quietly looked down at her hand. The hand that had pierced Haruaki's shoulder.

"We... have sinned. The sin called a curse. We... are already cursed—all covered by cursed, cursed all over..."

"That's..."

"Not only that! I-I also have this curse of an unattainable wish. Actually, I really, really, really want to lift this curse...!"

I've never seen Konoha this emotional before, Haruaki thought. The reason was definitely the hand she was staring at. The hand that had nearly taken his life, still with lingering traces of red right now.

"Although I don't quite understand everything, if you want to lift a curse, I'm willing to do anything to help. I've already said this before and I'll continue to say it. I will always stand by your side, all of you."

Despite Haruaki saying that, Konoha still hung her head for a while as though enduring something.

"I have done something irrevocable. This has brought me to realize once again how close I actually am to curses. I still remember the sensations on my hands, the taste of the blood splashing into my mouth, the screams entering my ears. I have no wish to know them at all. If only I could forget them, if only I could pretend none of that ever happened!"

Murmuring emphatically, her words instantly turned into a screaming tone of voice.

But then she continued quietly.

"Even so—They still won't disappear. These memories will hassle me incessantly, I will be helplessly crushed by them. No, I am thinking to myself, hurry and be crushed. This is my rightful punishment for excessively ugly sins. This is the malevolence I harbor towards myself. It's the curse I have cast upon myself. Already... I have no choice but to curse myself...!"

Haruaki felt that she seemed to be exerting force on her hand.

"...It's no good already. I can't... keep relying on what you said about standing by my side. Because I cannot forgive myself, to an uncontrollable extent. To pretend not to see, to suppress and endure—I absolutely cannot do that. So..."

Then she looked up with a smile resembling despair and resignation.

Meanwhile, she was giving off unusual vibes—

Raising her hand, she aimed her knife hand at her own neck.

"I want to... end all this—"

Seeing that, everyone gasped in surprise. No way. Impossible.

"Wait... K-Konoha!"

"Konoha-kun! Don't do something foolish!"

"Kono-san, hold on, wait first! Reconsider this!"

Rather than surprised, Fear seemed more angry than anything. Frowning intensely, she leaned forward.

"Cow Tits...! You great big dummy! What the heck are you thinking!?"

Fear was tightly clutching the chains of cubes extending from her palms. Because they were still being used to restrain the unconscious Kotetsu, she was unable to use the Rubik's cubes. She could only glare at Konoha and say:

"You are the first fellow cursed tool that I met—like a rival competitor. The sight of you pisses me off. Yeah, that's right, the sight of you pisses me off a lot. But exactly because of that, I want to win against you. That's why, in order not to lose to you, I'm trying hard to do beneficial things for people—"

Her words were probably failing to keep up with her changing emotions. At this time, Fear swallowed her voice back into the depths of her throat.

"But in spite of that... You want to run away on your own instead! You're going to give up first!?"

Fear screamed from her heart. Her intense emotions could be felt. The words of her true and definite feelings.

—But in spite of that... Even with Fear's words...

The swing of Konoha's hand, chopping at herself, still could not be stopped.

Part 3

On the roof, she was looking at the night sky. A beautiful starry sky. Although visibility was low, she thought to herself, this sky of stars truly remains unchanged over hundreds of years. Just at this time—

"What are you doing~?"

A laid back voice. He poked his little head out towards the roof. He had probably prepared a ladder to come up here after discovering her.

He was still showing a face that rivaled his voice in silliness.

His head was wrapped in bandages.

"Thou hast clearly fallen from a height only recently. Yet thou art climbing up to this sort of place again. Art thou a fool?"

"It's not like I can fall from this roof. It's very wide here."

Clearly the roof was very wide, but for some reason, he was sitting tightly next to her. Then he looked up at the stars.

She sighed and murmured quietly. She also knew she was being incoherent.

"I desire the sight of fresh blood. 'Tis a curse even thou art helpless against."

Without feeling afraid, he gave a surprising response again.

While cocking his head, he extended his arm towards her.

"I see. Then do you want to try slicing me? Maybe the body of a person who can't be cursed might be different from an ordinary person's."

This was the final straw.

"Aha..."

She could not suppress the urge to laugh. So this was what was meant by bursting with laughter.

"Haha... Haha... Hahaha! Kukukuku... Uhahahahahahaha!"

"W-What's wrong?"

She could feel his surprised gaze. Twisting herself around, slapping the roof tiles repeatedly, she continued to laugh.

Too funny. So funny that she wanted to curse.

This boy—surely, he must be standing in a place so far away from curses that he ought to be cursed. That sense of distance made her want to curse him. However, whether cursing others or getting cursed, both were probably equally natural things in his perspective. Just like pebbles facing the sun, he simply noted their presence.

"Fufu~... Mmmph... Fu... Heehaha..."

"Hmm... Are you someone who likes laughing?"

"Uku, no no no. 'Tis been a very long time since I last laughed in this manner. Several centuries ago."

She finally calmed down. While wiping tears of laughter from her face, she looked at his face from the side.

"Hey—Wouldst thou like us to form a true master-servant relationship? No, a relationship that surpasses that between masters and servants?"

"Huh?"

Asking him was really too underhanded. Because clearly that was what she wanted.

She wanted to become one with him. She wanted to be surrounded by that kindness and strength that allowed him to laugh off curses. She wanted to let that happy foolishness belong to herself. She wanted the two of them to become one in all respects.

"Thou asked earlier what I was doing, yes? Thinking would be the answer. Then because of what happened earlier, I have prepared myself."

"What do you mean?"

She brought her face slightly closer to him.

"Let us establish a true contract. I shall lift my curse. In return—"

That was the time when she had truly made her decision.

Forming the core of her current self, a new meaning of existence.

To lift her curse.

To become an ordinary human.

To live together with him henceforth.

That was why the price she demanded from him in a whisper was exceedingly simple.

—Stay by her side, forever and ever.

Part 4

Then Haruaki saw it.

Konoha had resolutely severed her hair by her own hand.

"Eh...?"

"I—"

At the same time, tears burst out from Konoha's eyes. One drop, two drops. Rolling out one after another, the teardrops were countless.

"I... absolutely cannot forgive myself for hurting you, Haruaki-kun. However... I also cannot give up on these feelings. This extremely powerful curse, known as a wish that cannot be fulfilled. As quickly as possible, I want to lift this wish that leads to the future. Because if I have to continue enduring it, I might end up crushed by my curse from the past... the truth of my bloodstained hands..."

Her hair, her rolling tears, they all fell.

However, her eyes remained focused straight on Haruaki, never shifting away at any point.

"I know... This is only my willfulness. But my curse from the past, together with the curse I have brought upon myself now, they really make me very dangerous. Hence, I want to move forward, no longer being my past self... I want to overwrite my past self completely!"

Mixed with sounds of sobbing as though her throat was twitching—

"Like this... Cutting my hair... It's just a kind of psychological effect similar to comforting myself... But I still want to... be able to relax slightly more. I want to feel less burdened... by the weight that restrains my feet and the curses of past and present."

"Konoha..."

"I can't endure any longer. It's definitely too late if I have to lift my curse first, create a barrier to prevent myself from hurting others, then move forward. Therefore... I don't want to endure any longer...!"

Her voice continued, sounding like it was forced out. A voice that was trembling and hoarse but carrying incredible vigor at the same time.

"...I can only change into a new self, one that no longer needs to endure. I am currently being eaten away by an unprecedentedly powerful curse. In order to resist that curse, this is the only thing I can do. Although I know this is only my willfulness, I still want to do this...!"

Haruaki could not be sure if he fully understood what Konoha was talking about. But he wanted to understand. Because Konoha had never laid her emotions bare like this before.

"What are you enduring?"

"The ultimate goal... I want to lift... this curse of an unattainable wish.
Namely... Namely, it's—"

Konoha's voice and expression collapsed in form completely, almost like a child's.

Then—

"I... love you, Haruaki-kun!"

In a sobbing voice, as though screaming, as though roaring, she confessed her feelings. Haruaki felt an impact as though the world had suddenly started shaking. Konoha continued to speak with her face crumpled:

"Whether as a woman towards a man, or as a sword towards its master!
Either identity is fine! Although I don't want you to call me Kono-nee anymore, if you really want to say it, that's fine too. That's totally fine too!
Nothing else matters, I just want to become one with you—To fulfill that promise, I want to stay forever by your side!"

Konoha took a step forward.

"I want to talk to you, Haruaki-kun, laughing together, drinking tea together,
I wish you could touch me—"



Then she took another step.

"Because you're very oblivious, Haruaki-kun... I'll explain it even more bluntly! I want to... do many more things with you, Haruaki-kun. I wish you could hold my hand, I also wish you could touch my head. I also wish for you to praise me, to scold me, to take baths together with me, and also—"

Her shoulders shook particularly violently, apparently from clenching her fist forcefully.

"I also want... to have relations with you, Haruaki-kun!"

"Ah—"

"Of course... Haruaki-kun, I also want to have... your babies..."

By the time he regained his senses, Konoha's face was already before his eyes.

Eyes brimming with tears, glasses, lips, all approached him even closer—

Then on his own lips, he felt a very soft sensation.

It was anyone's guess how much time actually passed.

Only then did the soft sensation finally leave his lips.

"...This is... my new self from now on."

Konoha used both hands to hold his face in place by the cheeks, still keeping her face before his eyes. Although all covered in tears, her expression seemed refreshed as though all gloom had been swept away, it was Konoha's usual smiling face. Hence, what just happened made him feel even more embarrassed.

"Haruaki-kun, you said that you're willing to do anything to help if it's for lifting a curse, didn't you? Since you said so... You must prepare yourself. So, I am also counting on you regarding this curse of mine..."

Then she giggled.

Haruaki could only stare at her in shock. Suddenly, he felt all of his blood gathering towards his face. What was that just now? So it was basically that? Why? Although he understood, but why? What to do? Lips. Konoha's lips—

"E-Eat—this——!"

"Gah—!"

Haruaki felt a blow to the side. Fear had pounced, attacking him with a flying cross chop. She was also flushed red in the face, waving her hands meaninglessly with the chains of cubes attached.

"Too... T-T-T-T-T-T-Too shameless! Truly shameless to the extreme, this shamelessness! What are you thinking? I'll curse you both, I'll absolutely curse you both!"

"This is yet another mistake of a lifetime for me! After all, bringing a camera was definitely impossible given today's situation!"

As usual, Kuroe was speaking a tone of voice impossible to tell whether she was serious or not. But speaking of hysteria, it felt like Kirika was almost the same as Fear. Flushed red in the face, she was striding over, speaking incoherently in broken sentences for some reason.

"Konoha-kun! This is! Cheating, you! Stealing a march—A-Absolutely... Absolutely ridiculous! Truly, absolutely ridiculous!"

Looking at Kirika, Konoha smiled calmly in composure for some reason and even tilted her head mischievously.

"Even when you've clearly won the race for the face already, Ueno-san?"

"Ugh!"

Kirika backed away in shock. Haruaki was totally lost but apparently there was something that only the two girls knew.

"Y-You saw it huh..."

"I won't hold back anymore. Because we are in the same position now."

Konoha smiled while she spoke. Kirika sighed deeply, at a loss for words.

"Is that so? Hmm, you're right, that is the case... That's exactly the result I wanted. If we could compete openly, fair and square... That's right, it's not absolutely ridiculous..."

She was murmuring softly. Haruaki also began to understand the complicated relationship between the two girls.

That said, the biggest issue was apparently himself, the one stuck in the center of chaotic disputes.

"Muu... What's with the atmosphere in this shameless space...?"

Only Fear was pouting, her intently scrutinizing gaze moving back and forth over everyone.

Part 5

Kotetsu suddenly woke up in alarm. He was currently being moved, carried on someone's back.

"Wha—"

"You've woken up?"

The back of her head was in front of his eyes, her hair slightly shortened.

"What is going on—?"

"I am taking you back to my home."

"Truth be told... What nonsense are you spouting?"

He swiftly surveyed his surroundings. Yachi Haruaki, Fear-in-Cube, a doll and the girl in the leather bondage suit. All of them were walking together nearby. Although they glanced at him, none of them took particular action. If he wanted to escape, he should be able to. However—

"This is not nonsense, Kotetsu. You are like a younger brother to me.
Hence—"

"Hence?"

"...Well, using the Draconian's style, let me tell you why I am this strong and powerful. There are many other reasons, but if I had to say, it is for you to witness personally with your own eyes the final fates for existences like us."

She turned her head to look at him sideways while speaking. Simply from the sight of her profile, Kotetsu understood. The person in front of him was her pathetic self he had seen in the beginning, yet at the same time, she was also the same person he had been living with for the past few days.

"Cursed sword such as us, how should we live in this era and how are we supposed to live on... You are also living in the current era. Even if you have been fixated on becoming stronger all this time, this matter can't possibly have never crossed your mind, right?"

"..."

He refused to answer. Instead, he asked a different question.

"Have you thought about the possibility that I might avenge Nirushaaki-sama?"

"The way I see it, please be my guest if you're capable of doing that. However, you should already understand, yes? My current self is not quite the same as who I was until now."

She turned her head again. That glasses-wearing profile. Shining brightly between the gap—familiar eyes.

"Simply stated... Since you lost, just shut up and obey, Kotetsu."

"...Truth be told, that's so unfair. I really have no idea what attitude I should use to face you..."

"Any is fine. Both sides are still me."

"Guh... Such tyranny."

"I have decided to allow myself to think this: it's fine to be a little tyrannical towards a little brother. Please don't worry. A vacancy happened to open up for that position after a promotion."

"...?"

Although completely lost—

No matter what, resistance was already pointless—Kotetsu resigned himself.

She was holding two Indulgence Disks in her hand. These were discovered together with «Bartolomey Oblivion»'s remains in the trash can after searching the western mansion using the information Nirushaaki had provided Haruaki. To Fear, these were items of the highest value. Having decided to collect Indulgence Disks actively, to think she would obtain two

together this time, it was definitely a very happy occurrence. However, there were other things bothering her at the moment.

Playing with the Indulgence Disks in her hand, Fear chatted with Kuroe while paying attention to Haruaki walking in front.

"Ficchi, I think you suffered more injuries this time than usual. Are you okay? Does it hurt anywhere?"

"I'm totally fine, don't worry. At least in my current condition, I still don't need to depend on you who's so out of energy that white hair is appearing."

"It's not like my hair has turned all white, so I was thinking I could still spare a little life force~"

"Yeah, I guess I did suffer relatively more injuries this time, it's like I didn't perform very well in battle either, but that's—that's because I simply wasn't in best condition! Because there were too things going on in my mind, and basically, there's those eyesores waving before my eyes all the time, drawing my attention controllably, that's why my concentration kept getting interrupted!"

"...Yeah, me too, I guess it was the same for everyone. Just seeing Kono-san standing there in the enemy camp was enough to feel agitated. Overall, it was a very difficult battle to go all-out."

This kind of conversation continued for a while—

Finding the right moment, Fear lowered her voice and whispered to bring up the main topic.

"By the way, umm—basically that. Everyone... has kissed before...?"

"Oh my~ Kono-san's boldness really took me in for quite a shock~"

"Let me try asking, just in case, umm, Kuroe... Don't tell me you've kissed Haruaki too—"

"Speaking of which, yes. But it was just on the forehead."

"What!? I don't really get what kissing the forehead represents, but... Really...? N-No wait, I've done it too! Kissing is very normal, right? Yeah, although at the time, I was in the form of a cube."

In any case—Fear recalled how Konoha had shouted her feelings without any pretense at all.

That was what people called a confession, right? As intense as a storm. Requiring astounding energy, it felt like it was the biggest one-time event in a woman's life. But this was what Kana or someone said in the past.

Furthermore, that confession also seemed to have brought some kind of strange change to her.

As soon as she recalled the image of those two together, a strange phenomenon would happen for no reason.

(Ugh...)

A sharp pain in the depths of her heart.

Like feeling sad, like wanting to cry, like wanting to scream out—

It made her feel that way.

(Hmph, that damn Cow Tits... As expected, the shameless brat is the shameless brat too...)

The storm of Konoha's confession had blown tiny razor fragments, flying in the aftermath, stabbing into the depths of her unguarded heart—That was the kind of feeling.

Due to the razor fragments lingering behind, they probably were not going to disappear so easily. They were not something that would disappear with time.

A wound almost like a curse.

While walking, Fear pretended to cross her arms while secretly rubbing her chest.

If this wound had to be healed...

If these razor fragments stuck in the bottom of her heart had to be plucked out, what exactly should she do?

Adjusting her pace fluently, Kuroe walked over to Kirika's side.

"According to my predictions, aren't you also waiting for a reply, Kiririn?"

"Fufu—It's useless lying to you. Although I think I've said it before already."

Kirika admitted it readily, shrugged and said quietly:

"I have already conveyed my feelings to him concretely."

"Oho~ Nice. Then I guess I'll say this first. If you feel it's unfair—that would be fine too."

"What are you referring to?"

"Basically what I said earlier... roughly around Valentine's. Kono-san is always together with Haru in our home, Kiririn, but you're not. So there's a way to make things fair in this area. Even with Kotecchan as the latest addition, we still have spare rooms at home."

After hearing Kuroe's suggestion—

"Well... what should do..."

Kirika simply responded ambiguously.

Right now, that was all she could do.

Part 6

"Oh my, things have ended peacefully. Wonderful, wonderful—Let's conclude with that."

"Lab Chief, can you follow up on your promise? I demand prize."

In the same Lab Chief's room as last time, Un Izoey and Amanda were facing Pakuaki.

This time, I really was just an observer, Un Izoey thought.

It felt like she still owed them many favors but was unable to return them.

Hence—this would serve as meager atonement.

She intended to ask the unknown that those girls would want to find out the most, rather than her own, as the prize for her adhering to the promise of staying behind the scenes at all times without intervening at all. She originally wanted to ask them directly but upon further thought, she realized there was no need to ask. She immediately understood the issue they cared about the most.

"Sure, please go ahead. Ask whatever you want. What kind of unknown would you like elucidated?"

Well then—Un Izoey spoke up and asked:

"—Can their curses be lifted?"

This was like a kind of concept, an unknown that could even be described as consolatory in nature. However, this should be what they needed to know the most. If the leader of the Lab Chief's Nation asserted the fact that their curses could be lifted, it would serve as powerful motivation, driving them forward to progress without hesitation. That said, there might be someone among them who might feel displeased towards the Lab Chief's guarantees.

As expected, Pakauaki answered assertively—

But the answer was completely opposite to what Un Izoey predicted.

"If your use of 'their' includes Fear-in-Cube..."

Pakauaki crossed his slender fingers as he held his hands together over his desk.

With an extremely amused smile on his face, he said:

"—Her curse is impossible to lift. Absolutely."

Part 7

Haruaki's group finally returned to the Yachi residence.

However, Haruaki suddenly felt something was wrong. Because the front gate was unlocked.

"I did lock up when setting off... Could it be a burglar...?"

The group cautiously entered the premises, only to find that even the entrance was open.

"There's some kind of sound in the house. Be careful."

"This is... the television, right...? Hey Kotetsu, time for you to get down."

"I don't recall asking you to carry me on your back..."

The group tiptoed across the corridor and stopped temporarily in front of the living room. Then they exchanged glances. Coordinating their timing, then all at once&mdsah;

"Who is this—!?"

"...Eh?"

They charged into the living room. As expected, the person inside was a stranger Haruaki had never seen before, a beautiful woman of unknown age. Judging from her face and figure, she looked to be in her twenties or possibly thirties. At this time, Kirika's face suddenly showed great alarm.

"Yachi, that's her! The person I saw in front of this home last time!"

"What did you say!?"

"Uh... Hmm, anyway, now that you're all home, why don't you sit down first?"

Completely laid back, the mysterious woman patted a nearby seat cushion. As a side note, only now did they realize, not only was she watching television without consent, she had also brewed tea and even—

"Ahhhh! My precious Kyoto limited edition rice crackers that I hid away—! Th-This—Haruaki! She must be an ultimate villain, we have to defeat her right away! Then violate her so that she'll regret being born in this world! Attack!"

"Attack!? That's too dangerous! By the way, who exactly—are... you?"

Haruaki's voice grew tinier and tinier because he suddenly felt a sense of dissonance about that face. There was an inexplicable sense of kinship. Clearly he did not know her but he felt like he did.

She had unlocked the door naturally, entered the house and was watching television and drinking tea in a relaxed manner. Could she be someone whom he had never met, but used to visit this home in the past? For example—like before his birth.

With a crunch, she bit into a rice cracker she was holding ("Ah—!" Fear screamed again) and pressing her hand next to her mouth as though in shock, she fluttered her long lashes.

"You're asking who I am... no way, right? That really breaks my heart!
Could you have forgotten me?"

Indeed. No way. Could it really be true?

This woman was his mother—

At this time, the woman suddenly extended her index finger and pointed at Haruaki's nose.

Then puffing her cheeks in a very deliberate manner to act cute, she said in a huff:

"I can't believe you forgot what your father looks like. What a terrible son you are, Haruaki!"

"...Huh?"

Afterword

Even though I said I'd try to hurry as fast as possible, I still made everyone wait a long time... It's been a while, this is Minase here. I hereby present to you, C³ XIV!

Oh dear, I'm really sorry for making you all wait for too long. As for why it took seven whole months since the last volume—Hmm, let's just say there are many reasons! (←contrived conclusion)

Oh, it's not because my body and mind were totally exhausted after the anime concluded. Rather, it would not be wrong to speculate that part of the reason was desperately writing manuscripts due to heightened spirits for limited edition bonus material and Episode 13's script... Seems like it. Apart from that, there were also many other reasons resulting in such a long delay, but in any case, I really feel a great burden lifted from my shoulders now that this volume can be published peacefully.

Anyway, let's talk about this volume.

The new character—disregarding whether she can really be considered new or not—anyway, she's the American Indian-style unguarded boobs! Readers, feel free to imagine her as carrying the shameless attribute of the naked shirt getup. Speaking of which, I really like barefoot characters. This was probably obvious ever since Un Izoey's introduction. Don't you find the image very healthy and wonderful?

I'm thinking there are probably readers who haven't read the contents of this volume, so I don't want to discuss too much. But in terms of story, this time's spotlight falls on a certain unappreciated person who's constantly getting criticized for being plain and useless boobs. In all sorts of ways, although I think it seems to be getting out of hand, she's been enduring and holding herself back throughout thirteen volumes so far... Please forgive her...

By this point, there's not that many pages left. Let me acknowledge and thank various people who've graced me with their care.

Illustrator Sasorigatame-sama, thank you for your hard work, especially working immediately after getting out of the hospital! Please keep yourself healthy! Editor in charge, Yuasa-sama, sorry for all the extra trouble from other projects initiated by the anime... I will focus my efforts on the main story from now on. Anime staff, all the wonderful voice actresses and

actors—Thanks to the anime, many more people have come to know of the C³ series, even more than I could imagine. Not only that, also thanks to sound and images, the sense of presence of Fear and the others in my heart has been upgraded immensely. When writing dialogue, I imagine Tamura Yukari-san and the others' voices. When writing action scenes, it feels like I can see Fear and the other characters moving around busily. There's a really positive effect on my writing. The anime really brought me many wonderful experiences... I really must thank everyone!

Also, I must thank all the readers waiting for this book, of course!

Seeing the plot starting to move dramatically, I'm sure some of the readers can already guess vaguely that C³ as a series is nearing its conclusion. More specifically, it'll probably take two or three more volumes. I will dedicate my full effort, writing to the very end. So if all of you, readers, will continue to accompany me to the last volume, I would be deeply honored.

Well then, see you next volume. I hope I really won't make you wait too long this time!

Minase Hazuki

References

1. ↑ Tree's leaves: the name Konoha(このは), usually rendered in hiragana, can be interpreted as the kanji combination 木葉 where 木(kono) means tree and 葉(ha) means leaf/leaves.

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